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CHAPTER BY CHAPTER

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THROUGH THE BIBLE

EXPOSITORY AND DEVOTIONAL
COMMENTS
BY

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IN FOUR VOLUMES

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Open Thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of Thy law.

THE whole of this psalm is tribute to the character and work of the Word of the Lord. Taught by his own experience the Psalmist portrays in a series of vivid pictures the perfection of God's Law, and its power in human hearts and affairs. Praise is added to praise as he reviews all that the Living Word has wrought in his own life. By it he has been quickened, cleansed, guided and empowered. He is a new-made man because of its working, and he cannot but declare its wonder and beauty to those that come after him. No tribute which he pays to its Divine nature is more suggestive than this of his prayer for enlightenment lest he miss its treasures. Were it merely the word of man, the product of human imagination or emotion, mere man could understand it. It could be clearly read by the light of human intelligence. But it is infinitely more. Hence, none can fathom its depths, or scale its heights apart from the aid of the Divine Spirit. It is inevitably characteristic of the Word of the Lord that men should realize themselves lost when face to face with its wonders.

Much of our own lack of understanding in the things of God is due to our inadequate recognition of Him Who is its only Interpreter. For only as the Spirit takes of the things of Christ, and reveals them unto us, can we recognize their matchless meaning. Were we willing to be taught, and anxious to fashion our ways according to the Divine precepts, we should never ask in vain for the opened eye and the understanding heart.

PSALM cxix. (57–104) 86.

All Thy commandments are faithful.

THIS is a big word indeed, recording as it does the conviction of one who has found the commandments of God infinitely greater than his own conceptions, and utterly beyond his own unaided strength. Again and again, when confronted by their high demands he has discovered his moral weakness, and has been moved to penitence and to prayer. The commandments of God have often awed him into wholesome fear. Often, too, they have condemned him for the obvious shortcoming of his obedience in respect of them. And yet the sum of his testimony is that all God's commandments are faithful. For with the condemnation they have brought the experience of mercy. With their challenge to duty they have brought the courage of faith. With their transcendent idealism in regard to relationship both with God and man, they have brought adequate dynamic. Thus it is that he sings praise to the God Whose words have come to him not as weights but as wings.

We often stagger at the Divine precepts because they outrange our limited resources of mental and moral energy. And it is often sheer fear that makes us recreant. Did we but remember that every command of God is a covenanted promise of power ; that His biddings are enablings ; that all His commandments are faithful, how different would be our outlook on life and the record of our faith's profession. It will make us more than conquerors to-day if we recognize, in going forth to the toil which awaits us, that we do so at the faithful word of the faithful God.

Hold Thou me up, and I shall be safe.

SELF-CONFIDENCE is the greatest foe to spiritual progress. Many an one who has run well for a while, and made fair promise of accomplishing a worthy course, has failed owing to the growth of an altogether unwarranted self-sufficiency. This is, indeed, the tragedy of many a life, that, misconceiving its own powers and misreading its own experiences, it has become proud, and has ceased to pray and to seek the constant ministry of upholding grace. The result is in every case the same—a triumph for the enemy. For unaided, any man is altogether insufficient for the strain of life's tests. It is only God in us Who can enable us to "withstand in the evil day, and having done all to stand."

How confident in the love and care of God is the faith which prays thus! It assumes—as well it may on the warrant of His Word—that He is intimately concerned in all that affects the well-being of His children. He knows their frame and their foes alike. He knows their circumstances, for He has ordered them. And He is interested in all that interests them. Indeed, if we do not believe this, or if we cherish interests which we cannot, without condemnation, share with Him, we cannot seek His upholding strength. But if the deepest desire of our souls to-day is to walk in the way of His commandments, we may with confidence expect Him immediately to assert Himself in answer to our call. Only let us beware of trying to take one step without His aid.

PSALM cxix. (145–76) 150–1.

They draw nigh . . . Thou art near, O Lord.

THE consciousness of the presence of untoward influences is always keen to him who seeks to live after God's law. Around him, as well as within, are voices which alternatively woo and threaten. Against his intention of faith and obedience all the power of the adversary is launched, if by any means he can destroy his confidence and effect his downfall. Nothing is so likely to ensure the ultimate failure of any, as foolish disregard of the enemy's presence and plan. To underrate the foe is a well-proved error in military tactics. In the life of faith it is positively disastrous; for we live in a world of hard facts, of which the fact of moral opposition is one of the strongest.

Yet, nearer to us than any malign influence, is the presence of the Lord. In the hottest assault we may always rest confident that He is at hand. The cry for succour which we instinctively raise cannot fall on heedless or deaf ears, for His nearness is proof of His love. He is at hand because He knows our need of His aid, and because of His intense concern in all that affects our lives. We are sometimes apt to think that it is our need of Him, expressed in our prayers, which secures His fellowship with us; whereas in truth His love is the bond which circumstances of difficulty and threatening only serve to make visible. When the hatred of the adversary is most keenly felt, we may rely most confidently upon the saving presence of Him Who loves us. And His Presence is utterly unconditioned. He is not near because we are worthy, but because we are needy.

Deliver my soul, O Lord, from lying lips.

PRAYER is perhaps the most searching experience of the soul. When in distress we call upon the Lord, He not only regards our petition but corrects also our faults and shortcomings. The light of the Sanctuary reveals the stains upon our garments, and makes us conscious that He Who works for us has yet much to work in us ere our lives are a worthy representation of His grace. It is thus that we are constrained to absolute sincerity in His presence, and are unable to call our sins by any but their right names. It is humiliating to have to confess that we lack that truth in the inward parts which God requires in His people; yet only so can we realize the power of His deliverance. Untruth and insincerity of speech must be dealt with, not only as overt acts but as the hidden tendency of the heart. And none but He can do this.

It is never a light thing for a Christian to be detected in untruthfulness of speech; for not only does it reflect upon his own character but upon the name of the Lord also. They who follow Him Who is the Truth must themselves approximate in ever-increasing degree to His likeness if they are to commend Him to others. And this, after all, is our chief business in life. If we fail here, we fail entirely; hence it is that we must constantly live in surrender to the power of God, which is alone effective in cleansing the heart from all its waywardness. This prayer for deliverance is no vain thing in those who are in earnest.

PSALM CXXI. 8.

The Lord shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in.

THUS does the Lord's protecting grace encircle the whole of life. As on each new day we go forth into the world to carry out our appointed tasks and to fulfil the ordinance of His providence, we are the objects of His care. All the difficulties that lie ahead, all the encounters, the obstacles, the perplexing things, are already provided for. In them all we may be "more than conquerors." And as each evening we come in from toil, weary and stained it may be, He is at hand to guard us from the dangers which lurk in the path of exhausted men. His gifts of rest and renewal are all directed toward our preservation from peril. So is life bounded both in its expenditure and its rest by the tender mercies of God.

The Divine ministry is never arbitrary. God's people are not kept from mistake and downfall if they themselves attempt to play fast and loose with His law. For He cannot be relied upon in an emergency by those who neglect Him in ordinary days. If, when the going out seems an easy matter, and the coming in is all of delight and pleasure, we are indifferent to His claims, we cannot summon Him to straighten out our tangles and to avert the consequences of our mistakes when these appear. When He, however, is actually recognized as the Lord of our whole being, this His promise may be realized with every dawn and nightfall. And every pure joy of life is intensified a thousand-fold when His preservation is an actual reality.

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem.

THE worshippers in God's temporary dwelling-place among men were by no means free of obligation. If they came thither with their prayers for His blessing, they must needs recognize their responsibility toward the maintenance of His House. If Jerusalem stood to them as the place where He dwelt, the source of their every good, they must personally undertake some share in its life. Hence this exhortation to pray for Jerusalem's peace. Ever the object of envious attack by the foes of the nation, the seat of God's residence with His people could only be preserved inviolate by His intervention. This, indeed, is written large in its long history. And His intervention is always responsive to the moral attitude of His people. When their hearts are toward Him in prayer, His hand is stretched out to disperse their foes and His.

How imperfect is our realization of the power of prayer! Did we but understand that the intercession of God's people, expressing as it does their confidence in Him, secures the putting forth of His might, how much more worthily should we exercise this privilege and fulfil this duty. And we should learn, as we pray for His kingdom, that true intercession is expressed not in word only. We should give ourselves to the cause which we bring daily to Him. We should make every possible sacrifice for its peace. And we should prove that prayer of this sort is power indeed. Amongst other things we should learn is the fact that God often makes a man the answer to his own intercession.

PSALM CXXIII. 2.

So our eyes wait upon the Lord our God.

ONLY in the attitude of ready obedience can we wait upon God without condemnation. The servant looks unto the hand of his master, and the maiden unto the hand of her mistress, not only for the supply of their needs but also for direction as to their service. And thus, too, it is in respect of our waiting upon God. If we are daily seeking to know His Will and to do it, we can with confidence claim every enduement necessitated by the demands of the task entrusted to us. He sends no man to warfare at his own charges. When He gives direction He bestows dynamic also. And His servants may hence wait upon Him with entire confidence that His Word will not overwhelm them. They shall be empowered to carry out His bidding, and shall find themselves transformed alike in disposition and strength. This is the miracle of the House of the Lord.

Be it remembered that there is a world of difference between waiting for the Lord and waiting upon Him. There are gifts so explicitly promised in His Word that faith can on the instant claim them. Nor does Divine love delay its response to the claim. We need not wait a single hour for what He has covenanted to give. But we must wait upon Him continually, that our souls may apprehend His Will and understand His righteous requirement. The power for Christian service is not a sudden acquisition so much as a steady accumulation. Hence we must take time thoroughly to learn what is the desire of our Master, and to renew our strength at the fountain of His love.

If it had not been the Lord Who was on our side.

IT is well to have life often under retrospect, for the guiding hand of God is not always discernible in the actual movement of to-day. When the conflict is at its height, all that we see is the strength of the enemy and the necessity of our own courageous attack and defence. When we look back, however, upon victories won, we see with unmistakable clearness how utterly we had failed had it not been for the actual presence of the Lord on the field. He it was Who controlled the fight, Who reinforced our poor weakness, and Who saved us thus from despair when the day seemed almost lost. As we review the conflict we realize as we did not when in the thick of it, that it was the Lord's battle and not ours. This is the mercy that binds us still more closely to Him in grateful self-surrender.

The difficulties of to-day are always apt to seem greater than any we have yet encountered. Seen at close range, the obstacles to our progress, and to the work of His Kingdom, loom larger than they really are. Fortified, however, by past experience of His victorious might, we can take up their challenge without flinching. The God of all days is the God of to-day. He has not brought us through so much merely to forsake us now, when we seem most to need Him. The determining factor in yesterday's encounter is unchanged to-day. Thus life has no terrors for us; for so long as we desire to be on His side we may be confident that He is on ours.

PSALM CXXV. 2.

So the Lord is round about His people from henceforth, even for ever.

THE secret of spiritual steadfastness is the constant recognition that the Lord is at hand. The fact that He is round about His people not only assures them of protection and defence, but at once encourages them to active obedience and dissuades them from fitful wandering. His nearness is proof of His love. Those who know Him only as the God Who sits upon the throne of Heaven, governing and judging His people, do not really know Him at all. The thought of His majesty may awe and subdue them, but is of little moral value as an inspiration to life. The knowledge, however, that He Who fills Heaven fills earth also, that He is round about His people in intimate, close communion with all their affairs, caring about their ways and safeguarding their well-being, invests life with seriousness and with deep satisfaction of heart. Prayer is henceforth no toilsome ascent to His throne in an endeavour to secure help from Heaven. It is the natural turning of the heart to Him Who is recognized as its Lord. It is the sacred intimacy of spirit with Spirit. This consciousness—that life is God-environed—stablishes, strengthens and settles His people, even as Mount Zion.

It is one of the tragedies of life that men see in and around it everything but God. Material things seem to obscure Him. Difficulty and opposition eclipse the light of His presence. The many voices of earth drown the gentle whispers of His love. So it is that, having no vision, so many perish. Yet all around them are the unseen hosts. Within reach of the hand of need are all the divine riches. Closer than the consciousness of weakness is the certainty of strength. And yet we are so often content to live as though He were afar off, and as though we were alone.

They that sow in tears shall reap in joy.

THE whole of life is compact of seed-time and harvest. Under one or other of these, all its experiences whether national or personal, find interpretation. Looking back upon Israel's varied fortunes, especially upon her captivity and restoration, the Psalmist sees how the misery of her former days is more than compensated by the joy of the present. She sowed the seed of penitence and prayer with many tears, while under the cruel hand of her captors. She reaps with joy and singing, at the hand of a bountiful God, the fruit of her travail. For He has not been unmindful of the cry of His people. Their present joy is the deeper and more intense from the fact that the long years of exile have served to purge out fault and shortcoming, and to make permanent the moral emotion evoked by suffering. For the joy of harvest His people must always be thus made ready.

This is the unchanged principle of all spiritual service. It looks forward, not to immediate result so much as to a time of harvest to come. There is a joy set before it, which is a positive inspiration to endure all that is involved of present toil and hardness. And, be it remembered, that he who would sow in the world's field the Good Seed of the Kingdom must often water the furrows with tears. Work for Christ is never a thing of smiles and laughter. It always means soul-travail. Yet upon every trying hour falls the golden light of the coming harvest, turning its gloom into glory, and making the strenuous labour of seed-sowing the most desirable pursuit of life. The certainty of that day is an abiding inspiration to faithful continuance in the appointed task. Let us work then to-day, having "respect unto the recompense of the reward." It cannot fail.

PSALM CXXVII. 1.

Except the Lord build the house . . . keep the city . . .

HOW futile is every human effort apart from the instant and constant co-operation of the Lord! "Without Me ye can do nothing," is Christ's interpretation of the poverty of all natural resource. It is as though our every capacity only finds its use and secures its development by submission to His control. We may strive to build either a fortune or a character; but, apart from the Great Architect, our strength is as water poured into sand. We may exercise all vigilance to secure what we possess, but unless we are ever seeking the protecting care of the Great Watchman our foes must prove too strong for us. Marauding enemies easily break in upon the best human defences; and he finds himself impoverished indeed who awakens to the fact that his sentinels have been overpowered, and that he has lost all.

Again and again is this lesson reiterated throughout the Sacred Word, because it is one which men are slow to learn and prone to forget. God is for ever bringing home to us, by precept, example, and exhortation, the fact that life is altogether too big, its duties too heavy, its oppositions too strong for our unaided nature. At the same time, it is of the essence of His Gospel that He comes to reinforce every sincere effort, and to communicate His own life to those who seek to live obediently and worthily. He is able to keep that which we commit unto Him—but only that. If failure there be, it is ours and not His. We may stand up to life because He stands up to help us.

Blessed is everyone that feareth the Lord; that walketh in His ways.

THERE is a kind of fear which perfect love expels. On the other hand, there is a kind of fear which perfect love inspires. The one is the craven fear of the slave, the other the courageous fear of the son. The slave is afraid of his master's severity. He dreads the crack of the whip, and cringes in abject terror before the power he dreads. Punishment for dereliction is ever before him. The highest law he knows is that of duty. In contrast, the son fears his father, not because any failure on his part will arouse his wrath, but because it will grieve his love. Having enthroned that love as the supreme control of life, he becomes increasingly sensitive of His pleasure. Herein he finds his chief happiness. Obligation becomes privilege. Duty is transformed into delight. This fear of the Lord is the enriching treasure of all His children.

To walk in His ways is to tread no hard path, hedged round with irksome restrictions. On the contrary, ways of pleasantness and paths of peace open up in flowering beauty before the man to whom God is love. True, there are foes to be met therein, and dark valleys to be traversed. But no man walks alone there, nor fights unaided. They who fear the Lord thus, find Him their constant companion; and in that fellowship are delivered from all other fear. And it is always a partnership of power. Nothing of obedience or duty is impossible to them as they walk with Him.

PSALM CXXIX. 2.

Yet they have not prevailed against me.

WHEN all the fluctuations of Israel's experience have been estimated, the final resultant is praise and victory. The nation has been brought low again and again. Heathen peoples have been used as the sword of the Lord to scourge them. Events have frequently seemed to go entirely against them. Judged, however, by the long record, which is the only true method of moral and spiritual judgment, it is well seen that God has been over all and that His persistent purpose has ultimately prevailed. The wrath of man has been turned to His praise. The enmity of foes has been controlled by His love. His people have been chastened but not killed. After long conflict victory has finally rested with them; and their history is prophecy also. For what God has been to them He will yet be.

The outstanding feature of the Christian warfare is the constant change of its appearance. Whether we fight with foes within or around our lives, the difficulty of encounter is largely increased by the many disguises of the enemy and his repeatedly altered methods of attack. No man, however wary, can hope to cope with them unaided. His strongest defences are all too weak to withstand direct attack, nor can his foresight anticipate the strategy which plots his overthrow. It is the sheer weight of our own helplessness which casts us upon the Lord. If we look to Him, and seek to be true to the holy alliance into which He gladly enters with us, Israel's song shall become ours too.

With the Lord there is mercy, and with Him is plenteous redemption.

THIS is sufficient ground for firm hope. The sins and shortcomings of the past may reproduce themselves in coming days. Indeed, experience sadly attests that what men have been they will yet be; for to-morrow is inevitably the harvest of to-day. Yet to those who know the Lord the future has no terrors. For though we fall, and falling trail our garments in the dust, with Him there is mercy. He takes note of the sin, it is true; but He knows also the weakness of our frame. His judgment is that of perfect love and knowledge, and His mercy is never sought in vain. Forgiveness and cleansing are blessings of a Covenant which no human transgression can annul.

"And with Him is plenteous redemption." However strong are the fetters, forged in the fires of sin, which now bind us hand and foot, He can break them. Clearly the marks of captivity are upon many of us. Defiled mind, degraded taste, haunting memory, accusing conscience, all bear witness to the bondage into which sin has brought us. But let us not regard these as inevitable, since it is part of the Gospel that the living Christ has brought deliverance to the captive. At His touch the strongest chains fall off, and the imprisoned soul is brought out into the sunshine of a new world, henceforth to serve God with the imparted power of a new life. This is the promise which warrants hope for every self-despairing one. And countless men in every age attest its truth and power.

PSALM CXXXI. 2.

My soul is even as a weaned child.

WHEN life is brought under the control of the Spirit of God by willing surrender to His influence and glad obedience to His Word, a twofold work is effected. Old dependence, habit, and ideal relax their hold and lose their power. Hitherto they have together made up life's total. Now the soul is weaned *from* them. They fall into the limbo of forgotten things, for the new life displaces them. At the same time new aims and instincts strangely take possession. The soul is weaned *unto* Life eternal. Henceforth it seeks its sustenance and satisfaction in the things of the Spirit. Therein it grows, finding itself in increasing correspondence with a new world.

The miracle of the new life is effected in no other way than by the work of the Holy Spirit. Men may prove the hollowness of worldly things, and may at the same time become completely dissatisfied with those pursuits and pleasures to which they are devoted; and yet be unable to shake themselves free. They may even desire the good of the land which they see dimly and afar off, and yet cannot bring themselves across its borders. For new dispositions can only be created by the Author and Giver of life. New energies are the product of union with Him. None are ever weaned from earth and unto the things of the Kingdom except by His power. This is why the call to "yield yourselves unto God" is the Gospel for us all. For only thus can we lose the old and gain the new and abiding life.

He will not turn from it.

THE faithfulness of God is the foundation of His people's confidence. His oath binds Him, and His promises are the expression of His eternal nature. He can swear by no greater than Himself. Hence His people may entirely confide in His Word, and build their houses upon the rock of His unchanging faithfulness. At times it may appear to them as though He had forgotten to be gracious. When sorrow and pain invade their peace, and calamity blasts their earthly hopes, they may be perplexed because of the apparent contradiction of His assurance by their experience. But time—that great interpreter of all things, helps them to see the discipline of love in what they at first looked upon as a denial of His Word. Even through their own sinning and waywardness they learn that His faithfulness abides, and that He does not turn from their penitent prayer. For what God has said He has said. Nothing in life or death, in time or eternity, can affect His pledge.

While we cannot too firmly trust His unchangeableness as the source of our every good and the foundation of all our hopes, we need to remember in what it involves us. By our very faith we are ourselves committed to faithfulness in all our dealings with Him. Since He will not turn from what He has promised, we must not turn from what He has enjoined, nor from what we have professed. Our faith must translate itself into active obedience. Otherwise His faithfulness will turn to our condemnation.

PSALM cxxxiii. 3.

For there the Lord commanded the blessing.

THE real landmarks in life are those times and places where God has drawn consciously near to fulfil His Word in the blessing of His people. They stand out as perpetual reminders of His faithfulness, and at the same time afford guidance as to the principles upon which the outpouring of Divine blessing is based. For every Pentecost is God's answer to the fulfilment of some governing condition by His people. He delights to bless, and has made the steps by which we may enter upon the experience of His fulness simple and easy. If we have not, it is always because we ask amiss. Here the blessing of an united fellowship is declared. When those who seek Him are of one accord, each desirous of His glory and of making the largest possible personal contribution to His Kingdom, the Anointing Spirit is poured forth. Silent as the dew, His power falls upon His servants and makes their lives fruitful.

How sadly possible it is for one member of a company to hinder blessing coming to the whole! Achan can halt the progress of the whole army by his unfaithfulness and lack of surrender to the Word of the Lord. For we are members one of another, and no man liveth unto himself. The true criterion of self-judgment is not whether we are personally satisfied with our present experience, but what is the influence of our lives on the common life of the Church of Christ. For it may be that all unconsciously, by lack of harmony with the Lord and with the brethren, we may be making the fulness of His blessing impossible.

Ye servants of the Lord, which by night stand in the House of the Lord.

IT is good to live in the presence of the Lord in the daytime, when all eyes are upon us and when the expectation of others is an incentive. Indeed, unless we do so, we shall fail both in receiving His grace and in showing forth His glory. But it is better still to stand by night in the House of the Lord, when our communion is with Him alone, when all around is dark, and when the only light shed upon us is the light of His countenance. For, sooner or later, into the life of every believer darkness inevitably comes. Storm-clouds of sorrow gather, the sky of hope becomes overcast, and in the gloom we are apt to lose our way and to take false steps which are perilous indeed. Yet at such times, when it seems as though the blackness of night had settled upon the soul, there is always a place of refuge. Like the gates of the City of which they are an earthly picture, the courts of the Lord's House are never shut. There in the secret place the troubled soul may meet the Lord in quiet fellowship and holy stillness.

Many an one fails to live worthily because upon the first approach of darkness he leaves the House of the Lord, as though He were dealing unfairly with him in permitting such a test to trouble life. This indeed is the history of many a total failure ; whereas those who cleave the closer to Him because of their own fear and conscious need, learn what He can be as they could never otherwise have done. And, standing by night in the House of the Lord, they learn to sing night-songs which are an echo of Heaven's harmony.

PSALM CXXXV. 18.

They that make them are like unto them.

IT is an inexorable law of life that we tend to become like the object of our worship. Devotion to anything stamps life with its impress. We may fail to leave a mark upon the world by our actions, but we never fail to leave a mark upon ourselves. One day each soul will go into the presence of God, bearing the record of those things which have exercised most power over its life written upon itself. In that day when the Books are opened each individual volume will carry an unerring record. Not only is this true of the degrading gods of the heathen to which the Psalmist here alludes, and of their devotees, but it is true also of those idols which men set up in their hearts to-day in defiance of the claim of God. For an idol is not necessarily a thing of wood or stone. Anything in fact which exercises more influence upon us than does Christ's Word is our idol. It may be habit, pursuit, or possession. It may be an altogether lawful thing which has come to occupy an altogether unlawful place in our affections. Whatever it is, let us bear well in mind the fact that worship determines character, and that character is what we take with us into eternity.

If it be true that a man who worships pleasure becomes shallow and flippant, that one who worships gold becomes himself hard and ungenerous, that he who worships self becomes small and despicable, the converse is equally true. He who worships God, revealed in Christ as the Lord of his life, becomes increasingly like Him. As the affection of his heart goes out in desire after Him, so he is changed from glory unto glory as by the Spirit of the Lord.

For his mercy endureth for ever.

THE whole of Israel's history is framed in mercy. As one by one their outstanding experiences are recalled, the heart of the Psalmist is stirred at the recognition that each expresses the mercy and grace of the Lord God. Theirs is a long story of exile and freedom, of enmity and friendship, of wilderness-wandering and promised land, of earnest consecration and grievous shortcoming, of witness to the nations and of pitiful defection from Him Whose name they bear. And yet the mercy of God shines through all. Many a time if He had dealt with them according to their deserving He would have had to cast them off. But His love endured the severest strain to which their fitfulness subjected it. True, He suffered them to be punished; but even then mercy held back the sword from their utter destruction, and entrusted them with new opportunity. So entirely is their story the record of His goodness, that the two are inseparable. Like an antiphon, this refrain follows upon every remembrance of the facts of their common life.

All that Israel learned of God's mercy was but an adumbration of that revelation which came to the world in fulness in Christ. They saw but the foreglow in the heavens. We live in the full blaze of the Risen Sun. Hence our responsibility is infinitely greater than was theirs. The mercy which sought us when wandering, and saved us from our sins, claims the entire devotion of our redeemed lives. Of what sort is our response to mercy's claims?

PSALM CXXXVII. 4.

How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?

WELL might the captives in Babylon find it difficult to sing. Exiled from their homes and from the House of the Lord, and taunted of their plight by their captors, it is not strange that they should find it difficult to lift their hearts in song. For it seemed as though God had forsaken them. What was in His purpose a measure of discipline, they could only interpret as a calamity which had overtaken and broken up their national life. Their hearts were heavy, for deliverance seemed very far off. And yet had they known that God was Himself behind their captivity, and that He had not forsaken them even in this strange land, they might have sung His praise to the wonderment of those who sneered at their helplessness. Could they have realized His unchanging love, they would have had no difficulty in raising the songs of Zion. And how convincing would such witness have been in such surroundings!

It is in a land wherein we have become strangers by our union with Him Who was once a homeless Stranger here, that we must exercise ourselves to sing the Lord's songs. True, the world is unfriendly, and its ways are altogether opposed to the ideals of our new life. Its enmity is, moreover, often a very real thing which makes us long for home with all our hearts. But just as Paul and Silas sang in the prison at midnight, so too we can sing the praises of Him Who never leaves us, and Whose love plans our every hour.

The Lord will perfect that which concerneth me.

THE incompleteness of life is one of its mysteries. Somehow we seldom seem to get beyond the beginnings of things. Friendships, purposes, and aims, only infrequently come to fruition. At best we have but the bud, not the flower; and were life bounded by the few years of our stay here, we should all become cynical by reason of our disappointments. In regard, too, to the deeper things of the soul, the stirrings of the new life, the aims of awakened moral energy, the large tasks of the Kingdom of God, we do not often get far beyond what we know are only initial experiences. However far and however sincerely we pursue Christ's aims we realize we are but touching their fringe, and that beyond us—out of our reach—there lies a vast-stretching distance. Intuitively we know that in respect of our own development we have only begun to live, and have only begun to measure the greatness of the task to which our faith commits us when we have to lay it down. But how full of comfort and courage is the promise that "He Who hath begun in us a good work will perfect it unto the day of Christ." Eternity is great enough to hold the fulfilment and yield the fruition of every earthly hope and aim.

When, too, we are conscious that our best work is marred and our truest effort unworthy, it is good to know that the Master-workman can correct our failure and perfect for His own use that which we sincerely offer Him. And this He does; or we should have a barren record indeed—even the best of us.

PSALM CXXXIX. 10.

Even there shall Thy hand lead me, and Thy right hand shall hold me.

THE thought that God is in every place, and that it is impossible to evade Him, at one time filled life with fear. It meant that every shortcoming was detected, every wilfulness marked, and every breach of His Law certain to be visited upon us in punishment. The unavoidable God inspired nothing but terror. Now, however, with experience of His mercy as our teacher, we read the fact of His omniscience quite differently. For it speaks of His loving concern regarding all that affects us. It declares that He is with us always, even unto the end of the world. If the path of duty takes us far from human companionship, He is still at hand. And even if, like the prodigal, we seize our portion of goods and make our way into the far country of sin, "even there" we shall find Him, and be found of Him. All unconsciously to us, His hand will shape our circumstances and compel us to recognize the love which will not let us go.

How immeasurable is the distance of time and space comprehended in this word "even there"! It baffles all imagination even to think of a situation in which God will be far off from us. For what shall separate us from His love? Even in the valley of the shadow itself we need fear no evil. And when its darkness has been passed, and we stand before the Throne, it will be without a tremor. "Even there," in the face of Eternal Majesty, Eternal Love will hold us fast, and will banish for ever all our fears. For who can fear when He is at hand?

The upright shall dwell in Thy presence.

THERE must be moral correspondence between the Lord and those who seek to maintain communion with Him. No man can know the fellowship of His grace in whose life there is any departure from entire rectitude. As a tiny grain of sand in the eye can blot out the light of day, so one unholy thing tolerated in the life of any cuts him off from the blessing of God. It is only the pure in heart who see Him. Many an one is, to-day, far from the enjoyment of even his own early experience, because he has succumbed to the temptation to deviate from the straight way of life in order to secure some temporal advantage. For no man can dwell in His presence in whose life there is anything unable to bear the searching light which flashes from His throne.

Christ taught that the sum of all good is to abide in Him. Though living in the world His disciples find their true life in union with Himself. Their deepest satisfactions of heart are found, not in the ways of the multitude but in the narrow path of obedience to Heaven's light. This is the secret of the joy which cannot be taken away, and of the victory which overcometh. Christ, for His part, has pledged to maintain this union with His people. Yet His pledge in no wise frees them from the necessity of excluding from life everything inconsistent with that holy alliance. The promise that He will make His abode with His people is limited to the upright—to those who keep His commandments. We can, at any time, frustrate His gracious intention,—to our utter undoing.

PSALM cxli. 3.

Keep the door of my lips.

IN nothing is the Divine control of any life more surely manifested than in its speech. The inner life of us all is betrayed by our words, especially when spoken involuntarily. As a man thinks in his heart so is he apt to speak with his lips. And words are winged things whose flight none can recall, and whose influence for good or evil none can measure. Yet how unconsidered and thoughtless is the speech of many who avow themselves His children. Untrue, unkind, insincere and malignant things too often flow from lips which nevertheless call upon God in prayer and proclaim faith in His redemption,—as though the same fountain could send forth both sweet and bitter. To say that such do infinitely more harm to Christ's cause than His avowed enemies are ever able to accomplish by no means overstates the case. And they themselves deteriorate with all such use of the tongue ; for it is that which proceeds from a man that defiles him.

And yet how powerful an instrument for righteousness are surrendered lips. Touched by the cleansing fire from God's altar they may declare His truth to the eternal salvation of men, and may show forth His glory to the ends of the earth. Here, indeed, is the tragedy of many a life, that the very thing which might mean so much for God and His Kingdom becomes His enemy. Well do we need to pray that the door of our lips should be kept. For the tongue can no man tame. Only the indwelling Spirit of God can secure the worthy service of the lips by first cleansing the heart.

Bring my soul out of prison, that I may praise Thy name.

BONDAGE of any kind is inimical to Christian joy and destructive of the spirit of praise. Redeemed men, who have cause indeed to magnify the Lord before their fellows, are often strangely dumb. Instead of their lives being an attractive force, causing others to desire the same Saviour, they are often just the reverse. Faith appears to have brought them to gloom rather than to glory. It would almost seem as though the Sun of Righteousness had not risen upon them, but had rather set. Of spontaneous joy they give literally no evidence, though they firmly believe Christ's Evangel. The reason is invariably not far to seek. Somewhere in such lives there is a hidden bondage from which deliverance has not been experienced,—because it has not been claimed. It may be to sinful habit, to fear of men, to desire of the world, to dread of the future. But whatever it is, it serves to imprison the soul and to silence its song.

It is part of Christ's declared purpose to set captives free ; and it is the experience of His people in all ages that He fulfils this purpose in all who trust Him. Not only does He call the dead man from the grave, but He strips him of his grave clothes also and sets him at large to glorify God in a world in which all things have become new. And it is incumbent upon all who profess His Name to give Him the uttermost opportunity of showing forth in them His power of redemption. Nothing less is a worthy response to His uttermost love.

PSALM cxliii. 8.

Cause me to know the way wherein I should walk.

THE pilgrim pathway stretches all untrodden before us. As it winds up the hill it hides many difficulties and is beset by many snares. For the enemy contests our right to walk there. The self-confident man is bound to stray, and sure to fall a victim, ere he proceeds far. For the subtlety of the foe is infinitely greater than the wisdom of any pilgrim, however sincere. Nor does past experience afford any certain guide ; for new perils are always shaping themselves. Life does not stand still for any of us. Yesterday's guidance was adequate for yesterday's stretch of road. But to-day we are beginning anew, and must seek the friendly counsel of the only One Who knows what lies ahead. How full of strengthening assurance is the knowledge that none ever seeks His counsel in vain !

Linked with this prayer is another upon which it entirely depends—" Cause me to hear Thy lovingkindness in the morning." If we would walk safely and worthily the day must be begun by listening to God's voice. His guidance does not come imperiously, as the rain falls from the clouds. It is expressed in His written Word, and brought home to the waiting soul by His good Spirit. If we do not still our hearts to hear Him in the morning we must not be surprised if, when evening comes, we have to bring to the Throne of Grace a shamefaced story of defeat and disaster. And if we are ever disloyal or untrue to the clearly expressed Will of the Father we must not expect future guidance. Light disobeyed becomes darkness.

Blessed be the Lord my strength.

THE Psalmist almost exhausts language in declaring what God is to him. So complete is his dependence upon Him, and so ample the adaptation of His grace to his varied needs, that it seems as though he can never come to an end of His greatness and sufficiency. "The Lord my strength" seems, however, to express the greatest experiences of his soul. To know Him as the fortress to Whom he may run in danger, and in Whom he may shelter himself in conflict, is a great thing. To realize His shield cast round him in the day of battle is a great thing also. But a still greater is to know Him as his very strength, reinforcing his every effort, teaching his hands to war and his fingers to fight, and enabling him to subdue his foes. For thus is Omnipotence made available for the business of life. Here is the union of Divine power with pitiful weakness. And this is the secret of every worthy accomplishment.

Did we always realize that God in Christ has come far closer to us than the Psalmist ever knew Him, how differently should we regard the task to which His Will binds us! If we grasped the significance of "the Lord my strength," we should not fear any foe, nor regard any difficulty as too great for the attempt of faith. For nothing is impossible to us if He Who is All-powerful dwells within us. What a condemnation of our past failures is this phrasing of His Gospel! If we have been straitened in respect of life or service we may be certain that it has been in ourselves—not in Him.

His tender mercies are over all His works.

IT is the Lord's mercy rather than His might which woos the hearts of men to faith and service. Awed by the evidences of His power, we are subdued to penitence by the consciousness of His love. His mercy voices His strength at its gentlest, and makes appeal to all who know their own shortcomings and realize the unworthiness of even their best moral efforts. For apart from His kindly judgment none could ever look Him in the face. The fact, however, that He Who made us knows the weakness of our nature, and thus estimates our every action, is a reassurance which invests life with a new and sufficient inspiration. The crowning expression of His mercy, whose long record is the theme of all Old Testament history, is the gift of His Son. For His pity is not of the powerless sort which men so often exercise, and which is at best but emotional sentiment. It is an energy working for fallen man's recovery. It is a sacrificial power which transforms the lives of those who accept it. It is Divine greatness stooping low enough to reach the deepest depths of human sin and sorrow.

"Over all His works" is an anticipation of the Gospel "whosoever." None in His vast creation is excluded from His heart. Every child of man is equally dear to Him, and over each He yearns. Despite the seeming inequality of opportunity and moral capacity, which often forms a ground of excuse for those who are discovered in moral fault, His mercy is the common heritage of all His children. In its might they may overcome if they will.

Happy is he that hath the God of Jacob for his help, whose hope is in the Lord his God.

NOTHING can mar the happiness of him whose present life is enriched by the active help of the Lord, and whose future prospect is altogether comprehended in Him. The present, for most of us, tends to be the time of life's prose. Its insistent duty, and the unrelieved monotony of the dusty highway, combine to rob it of anything like beauty. Its emphasis is on the practical. Its aim is, too often, immediate advantage. Yet always amidst its unloveliness God is at work with him who seeks His glory. He can make ordinary things glow with radiance. He can put a halo upon the commonplace and surround with gladness the most uncongenial tasks. This is the peculiar joy of the Christian life, that we work not merely for His ultimate approval but with His immediate assistance.

The future is, for us all, an unexplored region of hope. Even on the darkest day we can summon its foreglow to help us by its promise. And yet to how many has its light proved utterly deceptive! For hope that is not founded upon God's promises is of all vain things the vainest. To the believer, however. hope is not a pious imagination of better days to come. Its light focuses in the promise of the Lord that He will come again to receive us unto Himself. Happy indeed is that man whose hope is in Him, and who, inspired thereby, purifies himself even as He is pure. The standard is high but the moral imperative and the spiritual resource is adequate.

The Lord taketh pleasure in them that fear Him, in those that hope in His mercy.

THIS is something more than a mere statement of the Lord's knowledge and judgment of His people's ways. It goes further than a declaration that their service has vital effect upon the course of His Kingdom. For it assures us that it is within the power of those who profess faith in Him to bring actual pleasure to His heart. As an earthly parent finds delight in the progress and success of his child, so does the Lord also; though be it remembered that whatever excellence we find in human nature is but a dim reflection of His character. The pleasure that He takes in them that fear Him, means infinitely more than anything we know in earthly affection.

This has been the inspiration of all whose names stand for achievement in His service. They sought to be well-pleasing unto Him. They did not entangle themselves with the affairs of this life that they might please Him Who called them to be His soldiers. And in this they followed in the train of Him Who said of Himself, "I do always those things that please Him," and of Whom it was said from Heaven—"This is my beloved Son in Whom I am well pleased." Surely it should be our aim to follow them who thus followed Him and were enabled to accomplish the extension of His Kingdom among men. And this we shall do if we make the Lord's gladness our supreme desire, and work not for recognition of men but to please Him. The ideal may be high. But the inspiration is sufficient.

Fire and hail; snow and vapours; stormy wind fulfilling His word.

GOD often fulfils Himself in unlikely ways. His voice comes to us not only in gentle accents, but often in harsh tones and by rough experiences. Not infrequently we fail to recognize these as expressing Him, and miss much of what He intends for our blessing. For just as winter storms play an all-important part in the fertilizing and fructifying of earth, so the seeming unkindly ministries of God are entirely necessary to the development of our lives. It is by sorrow and calamity, by the rude shattering of hopes and correction of impulses, that we most surely come to know Him. And this is the life Eternal.

It was at Calvary that this word received its greatest interpretation. There, in events which seemed utterly subversive of every good purpose, in the fire of men's hatred and the storm of their sin, when the tempest blew with unabated fury about the devoted head of the Son of God, His word was fulfilled. Looking at the event by itself, we might well conclude that it was a ghastly mistake. In the clear perspective of time, however, we see that it was only thus that the Divine promise made in Eden could be realized of men. And it is this fact which interprets to us our own untoward experiences, and helps us to realize the manifold grace of God. In His light we see light and are reconciled to His ways. For we read with unfailing accuracy that Eternal Love does not contradict itself when, for our sakes, it assumes forms which seem unloving.

PSALM cxlix. 9.

This honour have all His saints.

THE songs of the Church are the songs of war. The people of God were never intended to live in earth's cities but rather in the tents of an army. For their first business in life is to fight against the enemies of the Lord and to subdue them. Into their hands His sword has been put for this purpose. To this end they have been disciplined by His providence, and for this purpose all their endowments are bestowed. To the Captain of their salvation they are bound by indissoluble ties of love, and when animated as one man by His Spirit they are an invincible host. Nor in this ideal conception of the Church is any exempt from its service. To *all* His servants is the honour given—of representing Him on the world's battlefields in the eternal struggle between good and evil. To refuse to take share in the rigours of the campaign is to dishonour Him.

We are all apt to take the Christian life far too easily, as though it were but an easy pathway, glad with present delight and bright with future promise. Yet there is nothing whatever to justify such thought in the teaching and example of the Lord Himself. He did not disguise the difficulties of the way, nor minimize the strength of opposition to the cause of God in the world. He bade His followers prepare themselves for hardness. But He gave them to realize also the supreme honour which this fellowship in service confers. And He has made the future bright with the promise of His manifested approval of those who, in His Name, endure.

Praise Him for His mighty acts.

THIS is the grand finale to an oratorio of praise. Every page of this book of Psalms is full of God's doings and of His ways with men. One after another the great events of national history have been brought under review to show the beneficence of His control. The experience of individual men has confirmed this testimony. The world of nature has been explored, only to find that there, as in the realm of human interest, He reigns and orders all its powers for the ultimate good of men. Into the face of past, present and future, the writers have each gazed fearlessly, and have found the glory of the eternal Lord in all. Now in a burst of loudest praise their anthology closes. He is worthy of the worship of His whole creation. His mighty acts attest Him Lord of all.

We are out of harmony with the ages, past and to come, if our varied experience of life has not inspired us with this same spirit of adoring praise. Somehow we have missed its plain lessons, and have misread its intimations of the goodness of the Lord. Or, we have been so taken up with ourselves that our hearts have become hard and unresponsive to the influence of His ever-present Spirit. Let us think again then of "His mighty acts" in redemption and preservation. Let us dwell thereon until the spirit of praise bursts forth in a flood which sweeps away every barrier and inspires us to declare His glory while life shall last. Before a praiseful Church the opposition of the enemy cannot stand. Its songs of triumphant thanksgiving scatter the powers of darkness, and are as the music of the Gospel which leads listening wanderers Home.

To know wisdom and instruction.

THUS is the purpose of this book declared on its title-page. In turn it deals with many subjects and reviews life from many angles of vision. It treats of the whole range of human conduct under almost every conceivable circumstance, and offers counsel concerning almost every possible phase of moral difficulty. And always with this intention, that its readers should come to know wherein true wisdom consists, and how it is to be acquired. In the abstract, wisdom is just that power of accurately estimating relative values which makes possible the unregretted exercise of choice. Its value to men needs no insistence, for upon its possession depends all good. Like a ship without a rudder, which drifts aimlessly as the sport of every wind and tide, is that life in which wisdom is unsought. Hence this book, of which it is the theme, is all-important. Apart from obedience to its precept and prohibition, men are like to come to utter wreck.

What was however mere abstract principle to the writer has become infinitely more to us. For when in the fulness of time Christ came, it was as "the Wisdom of God." It is in His light alone that we rightly understand the significance of all these proverbs. For "He is made unto us wisdom"; and what was of old time the application of a principle is, in this day of the Gospel, obedience to a Person. This is life's ideal objective and first necessity. To-day, as ever, the challenge of God's Word launched upon the world evokes the Greeks' demand for "wisdom." And the answer is unchanged,—"Christ the Wisdom of God and the Power of God."

To deliver thee.

THIS is the moral purpose of the acquisition of wisdom. Life is beset with snares, into which if men fall they hardly recover themselves. To be forewarned of them is to be forearmed against them ; unless, indeed, we treat the forewarning with contempt. " The way of the evil man," and " the way of the strange woman " are the ways of death. Countless have lost themselves down these broad roads, which open invitingly to the traveller but end disastrously. It is true wisdom which takes account of their experience and turns aside from the destructive deceit which compassed their ruin. For he is obviously a wise man who refuses to endanger himself in pursuits whose victims advertise their deadliness.

Deliverance by the force of example, however, while never to be despised, is only a feeble foreshadowing of Christ's redemption. For He makes men wise unto salvation, not merely by the exhibition of the results of folly, but by the impartation of new power, the creation of new instinct, and the inspiration of new life-purpose. Those who, in response to His Gospel invitation, link their lives with Him, are delivered from the very desire of such deadly delights as these by the expulsive power of a new and controlling affection. They know the truth, and the truth sets them free. This is Heavenly wisdom, indeed. How great and inexcusable, on the other hand, is the folly which conflicts with its clear dictates and despises—often for a mess of pottage—its rich gifts. And how blind can sin make men.

PROVERBS iii. 6.

In all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct thy paths.

THIS has been the steady guiding light of the countless men and women in all ages who have found that there is a way through the tortuous jungles of earth's difficulties and perplexities. To acknowledge God in all their ways, putting His claims before all others, and applying His ethic to their varied circumstances, has cut for them a clear pathway. As they have walked therein, they have realized the Lord's guidance; not always at the time—for it is not always given to the directed soul to realize clear indications of the Lord's presence in his obedience. But invariably, in looking back upon any completed stretch of the road, they have seen that only His constraining Spirit and restraining hand could have saved them from its perils and brought them to their present good.

Here then is clear direction for every circumstance of life. "In all thy ways"—in the affairs of home, business, and society, in matters material and mental, in the secular things of duty and in the sacred service of the Kingdom—"acknowledge Him." This may well mean the voluntary choice of a lonely path. It is the experience of His people that he who walks with the Master seldom finds that His way is the way of the multitude. It not infrequently involves sacrifice and apparent loss; but it ensures unerring guidance all the way Home. It demands courage of no mean order; but it is the experience of a great company which no man can number that, as they have confessed Christ, out of their weakness they have been made strong.

When thou runnest, thou shalt not stumble.

THERE are times when haste is the order of life. While the normal life of the believer is an even-paced walking, he is often sent upon errands on which he must run, girding up his loins and bending every energy to the fulfilment of his commission. Instant obedience is of the essence of his relationship with God; and when He gives specific direction for special service delay is simple disobedience. There are, however, dangers to the runner that the mere walker escapes. It is not difficult for him to trip and fall, especially when, as is invariably the case, the enemy lays hidden snares for the feet of the Lord's messenger. Yet, in the full provision of grace he is safeguarded; for when the Divine Word impels to haste, it ministers also fleetness of foot, sureness of eye, and strength of endurance.

The man who said, "I will run the way of Thy Commandments when Thou hast enlarged my heart," realized this. The King's business, as committed to him again and agan, required haste. It often took him into the enemy's land, and always demanded the entire earnestness of his being. Yet never did he fail to find, as One greater found when sent upon the largest and swiftest mission of all, that "He Who sent Me is with Me." Thus, too, it may be with us. When quick to discern and prompt to obey the voice of the Lord, we shall always discover the reality of His enablement. They who wait upon Him derive strength to run without weariness and without stumbling.

The ways of man are before the eyes of the Lord.

WITH what care should we order our ways if we realized constantly the eye of the Lord upon us. Much of our conduct is permitted—especially when it promises some material prosperity—just because no one sees it. We are so much influenced by the opinion of others, that we instinctively defer to it in deciding our actions. When this restraint, however, is withdrawn, few of us are free from the temptation to move along lines which are really out of harmony with conscience, but which seem to lead to some desirable end. That this is unworthy, most of us admit in our hours of serious reflection. That it should and may be avoided by constant recognition of the Lord's oversight, is a lesson we all need to have brought home to us. For nothing is hidden from His gaze. The secret things of our lives belong to Him. The ways which are obscure to the eyes of all other witnesses are noted in His Book.

At the same time this word is full of helpfulness. For has He not promised to guide us with His eye upon us? Is not His the eye quickest of all to see the need of His people? And does not the fact of His interest afford an unfailing inspiration to earnest endeavour? Since He sees the difficulties in our pathway of duty, it is not hard to believe that He draws near with sympathetic help. And how bright the loneliest ways grow if the heart is conscious of the presence of its Lord. In the love which His love evokes there is no fear—even of His searching gaze.

It shall lead thee . . . it shall keep thee . . . it shall talk with thee.

THE Word of the Lord handed down from father to child is the most precious heritage of any man. For it meets the deepest needs of life. It brings guidance, preservation, and communion, to those who accept and obey it. And what more does any require? Without a guide, the perils of life cannot be avoided. Apart from God's keeping power, human resource is altogether inadequate to the moral demands which life makes. Without fellowship, the heart is prone to fall into the sins of loneliness. Against all these contingencies, however, he is secure to whom the Word of God is precious. For therein he finds the living Christ, Who is at once Leader, Protector, and Companion of His people. In union with Him, the mind is enlightened, the will is empowered, and the heart is established.

It is always, however, the enemy's way to counterfeit the good gifts of God. Just as in the wilderness he offered specious imitations of the Divine assurances to the Son of Man, so he entices us from His allegiance by presenting the counterfeits of God's promises. How many take as the guidance of life his maxims of worldly philosophy, only to find that it lands them in ultimate undoing? How many are emboldened to trust in themselves, and in the power of their own will to guard them from evil, only to realize, when too late, it has brought them destruction? And how many seek in the ways of men for satisfaction of their hearts' instincts, to find that the world's friendship is their enemy, and God's? Let us not fall into their errors; for life is too serious both in its character and issues.

PROVERBS vii. 2.

Keep . . . My law as the apple of thine eye.

NO figure of sensitiveness is so complete as this. The delicate organism of the eye, so easily deranged, gives immediate warning of the dangerous presence of any foreign body, and is affected more readily than any other member by untoward conditions. Hence its use as a parable of the sensitive obedience enjoined as a law of life upon the children of God. Elsewhere it is used in illustration of the Lord's care of them. He keeps them as the apple of His eye, keenly alive to their state, and readily moved for their defence by approach of the slightest danger. Here it suggests the cultivation of conscience as the really important thing in soul development. It anticipates the Saviour's word: "If thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light; but if thine eye be evil, thy whole body is full of darkness."

The danger of treating the Word of God in off-hand fashion is a real one. While appropriating its promises, we frequently disregard its precepts; and even when not consciously disobedient, we are all accustomed to satisfy ourselves with the minimum requirement of the Divine Law. To be really conscientious in regard to it, does not at all mean that we must be morbidly introspective or perpetually condemning ourselves. It does mean, however, that we must be utterly sincere in consecration and in confession of conscious shortcoming, and altogether courageous in obedience. And, as we keep His Law thus, we find ourselves kept by His power.

He that sinneth against Me, wrongeth his own soul. SIN leaves an indelible mark on the sinner. Not only is it recorded in the Book of God against the Day when all secrets shall be made known, but it stamps with its image and superscription the life in which its reign is allowed. The man who breaks the law of God is himself broken upon it. Endeavouring only to please himself, he succeeds in utterly cheating himself; for with every evil act and thought he suffers—unconsciously it may be, but none the less really—some deterioration. Sin is an outrage not only against the commandment of God but against the higher interests of the soul also. Thus it is that a man wrongs himself in departing from the plain path of obedience. To outrage life's capacity by devotion to any purpose other than that of the glory of God—which is the chief end of our being—is to do ourselves irreparable damage. For no hint has been given of any repair in Eternity of that which has been wasted and destroyed here.

Nothing is more deceitful than the promise of enlargement and enrichment which sin holds out. It offers a kind of freedom which is in reality a prison. It allures men into a pathway which seems right; but the end of its ways is death. While for the moment pleasing sense and gratifying passion, it is robbing the soul of all power of pure desire; until ultimately goodness has no attraction. Could there be stronger warning against the insidious peril of sin than the wronged soul of the sinner proclaims? Men too often lose sight of the fact that the wages of sin are paid here and now.

PROVERBS ix. 8.

Rebuke a wise man, and he will love thee.

THE really wise man is always conscious of his shortcoming. He cherishes no illusion as to the imperfection of his best things. If he has attained unto anything of the Divine standard, he knows that he still falls very far short of the glory of God. If he has accomplished anything of worthy work, he is well aware that there stretches before him a large territory yet to be subdued and made fruitful. If he has conquered any foes and dispersed them, he is only too conscious of the hosts that still oppose his way. So he welcomes rebuke when merited, not because it is a pleasant thing, but because it helps him to see the weakness and defection which he must bring to the Lord for cleansing and adjustment. Although the reproof may be bitter to the taste, he knows well that its bitterness is tonic. Above all, he knows that the Lord to Whom his entire being is pledged is behind everything which brings into his life the light which illumines all things.

The spirit in which we accept discipline, even when it comes in the form of unsympathetic criticism, is a revelation of our relationship with God. The man who resists every implication of imperfection merely writes himself down as a fool. The one who takes it to the Lord in prayer, and is there satisfied with the contradiction of conscience, or humbled under the confirmation of the Spirit, is wise unto salvation. Such an one will cherish no resentment against the one who has spoken—possibly more truly than he himself knew—the needed word in season.

He becometh poor that dealeth with a slack hand.

WRITTEN indelibly in all the record of God's dealings with men is the law of harvest. He who sows much reaps much, and he who sows little reaps but little. While God has pledged Himself to provide for all the needs of His people, He does so by imparting to them the power to labour. He never enriches men in one realm of their being at the cost of impoverishing them in another. To make them rich without work would be to put a premium on idleness and on moral inertia. For it is perfectly certain that apart from the discipline of work few men ever develop strength of character. On this account slackness of every sort is condemned by the law of God. The Gospel denies to every man the right of idleness. Its strongest condemnations are spoken in regard to the sin of not doing life's obvious duty. Christ offers no fellowship to men save on the terms of strenuous earnestness.

The slack man is a pitiable object. For his attitude of mind grows upon him until he entirely loses power to bestir himself. He becomes a victim of his own easy self-tolerance, and presents a mere caricature of life as God intended it to be lived. Of course, some men are busily idle. Their slackness is seen in their disinclination to undertake anything really serious, although they are ready enough to spend their energies on profitless trifling. And they are poor indeed ; for at the end of the day they have no abiding fruit. By grace their souls may be saved, but their lives are lost beyond all recovery.

PROVERBS xi. 24.

There is that scattereth, and yet increaseth.

ILLUSTRATIONS from the law of husbandry abound throughout the entire Word. Here, applied to the principle of enrichment by generosity, it emphasizes the duty of unselfishness and the reality of its unsought reward. What men try to hoard for themselves, they lose. What they give with liberal hand to relieve the necessities of others, returns to them in the form of personal enlargement. For every such deed is a seed-sowing whose harvest is immeasurably greater than itself. Here surely is service in which all may engage, and especially those who know anything of the unsearchable riches of Christ. For these have been bestowed, not merely as endowment, but entrustment also. We have been made stewards of the grace of God ; and it is required in stewardship that a man should be found faithful to the purpose for which possessions have been delivered to him. The Christian who seeks only his own enjoyment and advantage at the hand of the Lord, stunts his growth and outrages his destiny.

This is one of the outstanding lessons in the history of Christ's Church. Scattered in its earliest days by persecution and opposition it overspread the known world. By its dispersion it became great. We see the same thing happening to-day in any Christian community which gives of its best, both in men and means, for the spread of the Gospel in the world. Its increase is proportioned to its liberality. Above all, we see this truth exemplified in Christ, Who laid down His life that He might take it again. And His example is our sure guidance.

The way of a fool is right in his own eyes.

THE Bible has much to say about folly. Even Christ Himself Who prohibited the calling of any man a fool in the carelessness of angry speech, used the term in describing one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich towards God. In this respect also of the man who built his house upon the sand, He used the same term, not in any contempt so much as in sorrow. For men only become foolish by despising the gift of Heavenly Wisdom which He has brought within reach of all. When a man imagines that his own thoughts are wiser than God's, and his own ways safer than His, little can be done but to leave him to the consequence of his folly. For nothing so grows upon the self-satisfied as this fatal confidence in themselves.

How small is the world in which such men live! Blinded to the excellence of those who differ from them, and above all to the richness of life as God has revealed it in Christ, they imagine that it holds nothing more than they can see. Even truth is no larger to them than their own trifling interpretation of it. Is it to be wondered at then, that those whose ways are right in their own eyes, and who persistently refuse to test themselves by any other standard, should be eternally written down as fools? The world may count them wise, for this is its own folly. But what matters most to us all is the verdict of God, which declares our destiny, and from which there is no appeal. It is little satisfaction to any man that his way has seemed right to himself—if its end is death.

PROVERBS xiii. 7.

There is that maketh himself rich, yet hath nothing.

SELFISHNESS inevitably brings its Nemesis upon those whose lives are bounded, and whose energy is directed, by self-interest. They spend themselves to acquire treasure which, when possessed, is void of satisfying power. They labour to gather fruit which, when eaten, turns to ashes in their lips. They live to accumulate riches which, as life draws to its end, mock them; for they have no power to hold nor to take them whither they go. How abject is the folly which refuses the eternal interpretation of life, and regards the things that are seen as the things of real worth. Whereas in truth these things only perish with the using, and involve him who begins by being their possessor, but ends by being possessed of them, in their own destruction.

That the converse is true, is attested on every hand. It is to the poor in spirit that the Kingdom is given. They, being rich in faith, are made heirs of God. They have nothing, and yet possess all things. Death itself cannot rob them of treasure laid up in Heaven. It can only bring them into its full enjoyment. Meanwhile their every sacrifice for the good of others and the objects of the Kingdom, both identifies them with Christ, Who Himself took this way of life, and adds to their true wealth. How wise are they who count the world well lost that they may walk in His company, and share both His wealth and His work! Life to all such is no uncertain adventure. They are enlightened at every step as to the true values of the things between which they must choose. And every day brings authentication of their choice.

A true witness delivereth souls.

THE sum of all Christ's teaching, of His discipline, and the impartation of His own life to His disciples, is that they should be His witnesses. Having indubitable experience of His reality, they are sent into the world to bear testimony to the facts of His life, His death, and His coming again. Behind them is all the power of Him Who sends them—power to defend, to deliver, and to confirm their word. Upon their faithfulness depends the deliverance of those to whom they go; for by their witness they liberate a power greater than they can estimate, and utterly beyond their own control. The gravity of the issue inspires them to faithfulness, for if their witness is not given souls are still held in the bondage of sin and darkness. But if with unfailing fidelity they declare the good news of Christ's Evangel, men are delivered from the power of darkness and translated into the Kingdom of God's dear Son.

How searching then is this test! And how sincerely should we apply it to our present lives! Are we so witnessing to Christ's power, not only by the words we speak but by the character we exhibit, as to convince those who behold us of His reality? Is the first business of life the increase of His rule in the hearts of men? Do we subordinate every other purpose to that of fulfilling our commission? Are souls being delivered by the ministry of our lives? If not, surely we should forthwith betake ourselves to Him Who is Himself the Faithful and True Witness, and Who can and will make us what we should be in this respect.

Better is little with the fear of the Lord than great treasure and trouble therewith.

THIS is one of the conclusions of true wisdom, which estimates things not at their face value and not from the point of view of immediate advantage. The world is for ever contrasting the lot of the rich and the poor, usually with envy of the former. It is part of its common philosophy of life that to acquire a fortune is the best thing a man can do for himself. The possession of wealth is supposed to bring every desirable good, and most people would gladly change places with the highly dowered. To know that such a view of life is superficial and defiant of fact, requires but little observation. One has not to get very far below the surface of things to discover that, in almost the majority of cases, great riches bring to their possessors more trouble than satisfaction. Men usually pay for gold with blood, and tears, and life itself. And to an unsatisfied heart must be added the influence of a baneful legacy as one of the undesirable features of great treasure. Far more children are ruined by an inheritance which secures them freedom from the discipline of work than are ever hindered by the seeming disqualification of poverty. To adjudge the worth of wealth we require to take both a deep and a long view.

That which is held along with the fear of God is infinitely greater, because it is eternal. Death cannot rob any man of that which he holds in trust from Heaven. And such is our only real possession,—that which we take with us when we go hence.

Commit thy works unto the Lord, and thy thoughts shall be established.

IT is significant that if we are to realize our own highest thoughts and desires it must be by first working toward that goal we set before us, and then, having done our best, by committing to the Lord what we have accomplished. Of course, it is necessarily far short of our ideal, and is marred by much failure both in motive and method. Even when we have done everything of which mind and conscience approve, we are unprofitable servants. It is the glory of the Gospel, however, that God co-operates with our best endeavours, and that when our own heart does not condemn us, we can surely trust Him to overrule our mistakes and to perfect that which we have sought to do. Do not let us, however, trade upon God's goodness in this respect, by committing to Him anything but the result of our utmost energies. It is no honour to Him to ask His blessing upon work carelessly done, or projects indifferently handled. For all true work is worship, and all unworthy worship reacts upon him who offers it.

The reach of each of us is greater than his grasp. We all set up ideals, under the inspiration of the Spirit and Word of God, infinitely higher than we have power of ourselves to realize. Yet every worthy thought of ours shall be established according to the work of our hands and the sincerity of our faith. This is the promise which Heaven holds out. That which requires eternity for its fulfilment shall not fail of fruition. How great is a life with such projection.

He that hath knowledge spareth his words.

TRUE wisdom is always characterized by meekness. It is not for ever talking of itself, its apprehensions, or its achievements. The man who has Wisdom from Above knows that at best he has discerned only a segment in the great circle of truth, and that there lies before him a vast field in which as yet he has taken but few steps. With the Apostle, he is satisfied that he knows but "in part"; and hence, while firm in the consciousness of what he has, he is neither contemptuous nor critical of that which others also profess. Truth is essentially greater than our fullest apprehension of it; and the wise man is he who meditates upon it, rather than he who is for ever setting forth his knowledge.

There are times when no man who apprehends the truth as it is in Christ can be silent—or ought to be. He has been sent into the world as His servant, and to hold his peace in some circumstances would be disloyalty. At the same time, we all need to learn that the most precious thing can be cheapened and deteriorated in value by over-display. And we need to bear in mind also that much talking is evidence of weakness rather than of strength. A drum makes a bigger sound than a rifle, but their power is in inverse ratio. Many a man simply exposes himself to the contempt of those amongst whom he lives by his unrestrained speech upon the profound themes of Divine grace. The inward control of the Spirit will alone save us from the folly of many words.

There is a Friend that sticketh closer than a brother.

IT is obvious that this word only finds its fulfilment in Christ. There are incidents, within the experience of all, of friendship which means infinitely more than mere blood-kinship. Based upon mutual respect and common interest, such a fellowship of hearts is the strongest thing in life. But even in its purest examples it only reflects and anticipates the friendship of Him Who enters into heart-relationship with those of every class and circumstance who are willing to receive Him. The rudest taunt flung at Him by His enemies was that He made friends of sinners. It was this which evidently impressed them more than anything else; and all His dealings with men in every age attest the soundness of their judgment. Since He is "the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever," their unwitting expression of the Gospel is the message of hope to us all.

For only He can enter into all the great loneliness of the soul. Other friends may come close to our hearts, but none so close as He, for none understand as He does our nature and our needs. And His friendship is the mightiest of all influences for the transformation of character. It has made men humble, unselfish, courageous, and faithful unto death, who, apart from its influence, had been but as other men. For those who share life's intimacies of joy and sorrow, of hope and experience, with Him, are unconsciously brought into harmony with His point of view and purpose. And this is at the heart of all attainment in holiness and service.

PROVERBS xix. 27.

Cease, my son, to hear the instruction that causeth to err from the words of knowledge.

THE responsibility of choice rests upon every man. He who puts himself in the way of instruction the avowed object of which is to seduce men from the ways of God, must not expect that any miracle will preserve him from its influence. Most backsliding may be traced to mental apprehensions created and fostered by teaching which has not God and His glory at its heart. The enemy sows the seeds of doubt and the tares of unworthy living in this way. There have always been those who have taught another Gospel than that which has once for all been declared in Christ, with the object of belittling His claim and promises, and of drawing from His allegiance hearts which have begun to company with Him. And it is the duty of each of us to refuse all instruction which does not make for His greater glory. Upon us rests the duty of trying the spirits "whether they be of God," and of declining their message, however speciously framed, if it tends to make us less careful in our walk, and less scrupulous in our obedience to His revealed Will.

Many a true believer languishes to-day because of his attendance upon a ministry whose aim is not the exaltation of the Lord Jesus. Considerations of policy may dictate their continuance in a fellowship so instructed. But there are more important considerations than these. The higher claim of their own soul's life demands that they follow such an injunction as this. For it is the Word of the Lord. And He is a faithful Guide to those who trust Him; and never more so than when that means going outside the camp "bearing His reproach."

Say not thou, I will recompense evil; but wait on the Lord, and He shall save thee.

THE spirit of retaliation, which is the spirit of the world, is entirely unbecoming in the child of God. For though men may ride over our heads, it is only as God permits them to do so. He is behind every seeming injustice which fastens upon us, and controls every disturbance of life by which we are troubled. To fight against second causes is thus in effect to deny His Covenant. In the heat of a provoked spirit it is fatally easy to deny the faith, and at the same time to contradict any witness we have ever maintained to the truth of the Gospel. How many lives have been utterly spoiled by the long cherishing of some purpose of retaliation which like a root of bitterness has defiled them! Nothing is more certain to make havoc of a believer's life and testimony than this.

How clear is the direction, and how certain the promise, to "wait on the Lord, and He shall save thee"! When the wrath of man has served His purpose He can deal with those who have dealt unjustly with His people. Once we have learned the lesson of any such experience we can safely leave Him to vindicate our character, and to bring forth our righteousness as the noonday. The long wait of patience is usually the shortest way to victory. Sometimes this involves the discipline of our own spirits far beyond any point of self-control hitherto attained. But the longest way round is the surest way Home. We fall a victim of the Evil One if we take any other.

PROVERBS xxi. 17.

He that loveth pleasure shall be a poor man.

HARDLY anything so grows upon men as the pursuit of pleasure. In one form or another, this danger assails us all; for there is in every life the desire for diversion. In its place there is nothing at all wrong in relaxation of mind and body as a respite from toil. Indeed, no one can accomplish good work of any kind apart from periodical cessation of its strain. But when pleasure takes the place of work in the thoughts and energies of any, it becomes a deadly snare. From being a good servant it becomes a tyrannical master. Under its influence men lose all sight of life's seriousness, and themselves deteriorate into flippant carelessness toward their true duty. When a man pays this price for the realization of any pleasure, however good in itself, he becomes poor indeed.

A twofold test must always be applied in order to determine the expediency of any form of pleasure in the life of a believer. First, as to its quality; and then, as to its proportion. The former is never difficult to determine; for anything which interferes with personal communion with God and efficiency in His service, or which exerts undesirable moral influence upon others, is at once disallowed. The recreation of the Christian must really re-create, and must not vitiate the stream of living water which flows through him. As to the proportion which pleasure should bear to serious work, this will be determined by every man's conscience in the sight of God, if he really seeks to be His servant. For he will see life as a whole, in which every factor makes inevitable contribution to its main end—His glory.

The slothful man saith, There is a lion without, I shall be slain in the streets.

EXCUSES are never far from the lips of the one to whom duty appears irksome. Challenged by its call, he finds no difficulty in self-persuasion as to his inability to carry it through. In this way he compounds with his conscience; until ultimately, being often outraged, it becomes silent. So he goes on without inward rebuke, deceiving himself as to his real intention, and avoiding all that calls for strenuousness and courage. The end of such an one is not far to seek. Did he but go forth to meet the difficulties he fears, he would find no lions at all on the highway, or, if found, they would all be chained. Choosing instead to fence himself by specious excuses, he loses the life he is afraid to risk.

He who makes profession of faith in God must guard his heart from every encroachment of the spirit of sloth. It is part of fallen nature that we are all prone to love ease, and to evade, as far as may be, anything that involves personal inconvenience. Thus it is that real difficulties loom infinitely larger than they are, while imaginary ones readily come into existence before our minds to afford us some measure of self-justification in respect of our evasion of life's serious and strenuous things. Whereas, what does it matter if we really seek to do His service, whether we are slain in the streets or not? It is not necessary that we should continue to live; but it is necessary that, living, we should obey the voice of God. There are infinitely worse things than death—especially death which is met in the way of duty.

PROVERBS xxiii. 17.

Be thou in the fear of the Lord all the day long.

THIS is our only safeguard against life's temptations. The prosperity of the wicked may arouse our envy, the delights of sin our desire, the state of others our contempt. But, if we set the Lord always before us, making it our aim to please Him, not as those afraid but as those who love Him, we shall find these things have no power to move us. Like a purifying wind the fear of God drives from life all evil desire, and inspires His children to fidelity in pursuit of their first purpose. It is the fear of God alone which makes men strong to resist temptation and to accomplish what is worthy. For it is in answer to this attitude of heart on the part of His children that He asserts Himself in the gift of His Spirit.

The fear of God is not merely a frame of mind to be assumed in the hour of worship, or when circumstances specially indicate His presence, or when some extremity of danger proclaims our need of Him. "All the day long," that is, in every duty however trivial or secular, in every hour however easeful or strenuous, we must abide in His fear if we are to realize the fulness of life. As in the world of nature nothing is hid from the heat of the sun, so, in the redeemed life, nothing can be withheld from His rule without impoverishment and ultimate serious loss. And moment by moment, as life is thus yielded to Him, we are kept in His love. The life of holiness is a succession of similar steps taken in obedience, and of moments lived in His fear. Thus it is a present possibility for each of us.

If thou sayest, Behold, we knew it not; doth not he that pondereth the heart consider it? . . . Doth not he know it? And shall not he render to every man according to his works?

IGNORANCE is no acceptable plea in extenuation of any dereliction of the obligation which rests upon the strong to bear the infirmities of the weak and upon the rich to relieve the necessities of the poor. Not only does the voice of God send His people forth into the world to represent Him in their attitude toward others, but the cry also of human need is ever sounding in the ears of those whose hearts incline them to listen. That every man will ultimately be held accountable for the right use of his endowments and opportunity is one of the plainest lessons the Bible teaches. It avails us nothing to declare our lack of knowledge in respect of the prevalent conditions of need. There is some ignorance that is positively guilty. It is part of our duty to acquaint ourselves with the facts of life as it is lived by multitudes around us, in order that we may fulfil our high calling as the children of God. Let no man imagine that he can avoid the responsibility of ministering to others by such an excuse as this.

God judges with perfect justice—but He judges. Before us all looms the prospect of one day standing before the Judgment Seat of Christ. There the only criterion of judgment will be faithfulness to entrusted duty. And there will be revealed, in clearer colours than can now be discerned, the fact that in avoiding the need of others we have avoided Christ. Nothing will be more condemning than the sentence: "Inasmuch as ye did it not unto one of the least of these My brethren, ye did it not unto Me."

PROVERBS XXV. 2.

It is the glory of God to conceal a thing.

SOME things God has made plain and open to the most ordinary intelligence. It is impossible either to mistake their meaning or to avoid their challenge. We think of them as being expressions of His glory and intimations of His Will. But there are other things, not superficially read, for the meaning of which men must search with care and often through painful experience ; and these too manifest His glory. And, in the search, men succeed subjectively even where they fail objectively. For they discover themselves, and become something of what He originally purposed they should be. The experience of most of us is that it is those things that have been difficult and hard to understand which have contributed most to our true development. For although God has hidden many things, it is not that they should not be known, but rather that in coming to knowledge of them men should themselves be transformed.

We see this method in Nature. Secrets which have for ages been hidden are now being brought to light as the result of years of toilsome investigation. What was mystery yesterday is commonplace knowledge to-day. We see it in the development of personality. God hides in the child what is, for His glory, to come forth in the man. Above all, we see it in Christ—the wisdom which was long hidden and the promise long concealed under type and ordinance. Who can say that the centuries in which the world was being prepared for His Advent have not ministered to the glory of God ? And who is not conscious that in Him there are riches unsearchable, which, when the patient search of faith and love has brought to light, reflect the glory of the Father in a darkened world ?

Seest thou a man wise in his own conceit? There is more hope of a fool than of him.

THE way of the self-satisfied is perilous; and yet how commonly it is pursued. For we are all susceptible to the temptation to avoid anything like serious self-examination. It is easier to grapple with any other problem in life than with the problem of one's own state. Something places us on the defensive at once whenever the validity of our own standards or the quality of our practice is called into question. With shrewd suspicion that we cannot stand before the tribunal of an enlightened conscience uncondemned, we do not hesitate to substitute, for the eternal canons of judgment, our own conceits. And once having made our standards fit our life, it is not difficult to make our life fit our standards. But what folly it is for men who must one day stand before the Great White Throne to so play with matters of eternal consequence!

Of all unwisdom this is surely the most unreasonable. For what does mere self-opinion matter if it is not based upon God's decrees? We may misread our own moral history, closing our eyes to the failures which mar it if we will; but this does not make us strong against the tests of to-day and to-morrow. We may affect an unbelief in the ultimate judgments of Heaven which we do not feel. We may delude ourselves that all is well with us when every reliable evidence points the other way. But what does all such folly avail when finally brought up against unchanging fact?

PROVERBS xxvii. 18.

He that waiteth on his master shall be honoured.

SINCERE service brings its own reward. Judged on the lowest grounds of all, it is politic for any servant to give himself with undivided heart to the carrying out of his master's desire. Since he is his, every interest and energy should be concentrated upon the doing of his work. And no master is blind to the value of such a servant. Faithfulness in the carrying out of small commissions seldom fails to bring its own reward in promotion to higher responsibilities. And while outward honour is thus bestowed upon him, the faithful servant honours himself also; for he acquires a measure of self-respect which is beyond all purchase. His fidelity inevitably records itself upon his character.

If this be so in the ordinary service which men render to men, how much more when it is recognized that "One is your Master, even Christ"! For He is able to judge faithful service as men cannot judge one of the other. He knows its cost, and at what sacrifice it is often rendered. Above all, He knows its motive power, and the love which prompts and inspires it. And in His service promotion comes thus. Those who are faithful when entrusted with pounds are raised to rule over cities. Work worthily carried out is rewarded by a new entrustment. Those who honour Him are themselves honoured by the confidence He reposes in them. And the secret of their success is that they wait upon Him continually, both for direction and dynamic. Those who fail in this respect fail entirely.

He that covereth his sins shall not prosper.

IT is almost the first instinct of the soul which realizes its sinfulness to hide from God. The consciousness that sin is an affront to His holiness never fails to bring concern and fear, under the impulse of which men pathetically attempt to cloak the disquieting thing. By ignoring it, by resolutely pushing it out of memory, by overlaying it with elaborate religious observance, they succeed only too well in hiding it from themselves. And, of course, it is by no means difficult to hide it from others, the majority of whom are pursuing the same course. The fear is, when men are thus dealing with sin, not that they shall fail in their effort to cover it, but that they shall succeed. This indeed is the tragedy of many a life—that it has apparently succeeded in getting rid of its sin. But sin cannot be so easily done away with. Its record in the Book of God, as on the page of human life, is indelible ; and Christ has clearly warned us that "there is nothing covered that shall not be revealed" when those books are opened.

How plain are the Divine directions as to dealing with sin ! Past violation of the Holy Law must be confessed to Him against Whom despite has been done. Present indulgence must be forsaken with honest intention of heart. And God mercifully forgives the past, remits its penalty, and at the same time transforms the soul's sincerity into energy. It is this experience which makes all life new. It may come in one of a thousand ways. But until it has come we wander in the dark as men lost.

PROVERBS xxix. 18.

Where there is no vision, the people perish.

CONDUCT, which shapes destiny, is always governed by intellectual conceptions. As a man thinks in his heart so is he. It is hence of the utmost importance that we see to it that nothing is allowed to interfere with or distort our vision of God. When we fail to apprehend Him in His declarations of power and promise, we are like ships without a compass being driven before the wind on a course which abounds with rocks and shoals. Never slow to see material advantage or opportunity of self-interest, we are blinded by these very things to the vision which means everything. For eyes dazzled by the false brightness of the world cannot see the vision of Redeeming Love; or seeing it, can recognize nothing of interest or attraction in it. And it is thus that men perish. For life without God is mere existence bounded by the grave. He perishes who fails to realize the true purpose of life and its chief end.

What a word is this, too, for those who are called to speak in God's Name to their fellows! When preachers lose their own vision of the Lamb, their words may be eloquent, but they have no power to move the hearts of those who hear. It was as the first herald of the Gospel looked upon Jesus that he cried "Behold the Lamb of God!" And so, too, it must be with all who seek to lead men to His allegiance. How many people in our Churches are perishing for lack of vision on the part of those who speak to them the Word of Truth. And how great is their responsibility, who, failing themselves, involve others also.

Give me neither poverty nor riches.

THIS is a prayer dictated by Wisdom which is from Above. It declines to choose its own lot in life, knowing that in the heart of God there is something infinitely better for His children than anything they can themselves frame. A man may seek poverty, imagining that he will thus avoid the snares into which he sees rich men fall, only to find that poverty has its own temptations and is not of itself any aid to holiness. On the other hand he may desire riches to escape the discomfort and difficulty of the poor man, only to find that riches bring their own perils, which few avoid. Wiser far is it to take life as God sends it, to do the next thing of apprehended duty, and to wait for the unfolding of His Will in cheerful contentment.

The imprisoned apostle gives us, in a later day, the secret of the mind which gladly leaves life's ordering to the Lord. "Be content," he says, "with such things as ye have. For He hath said: 'I will never leave thee nor forsake thee!'" It is the constant presence of Christ which makes either poverty or affluence acceptable, which robs either state of its peril, and which makes His followers triumphant over every changing circumstance. We may well pray that to-day the thoughts of our hearts may be so brought into captivity to the obedience of Christ that we shall rejoice to be just where He has put us, and to do what He has planned for us. For, once the central allegiance of life is fixed, we may rest assured that "He gives the very best to those who leave the choice to Him."

PROVERBS xxxi. 8.

Open thy mouth for the dumb in the cause of all such as are appointed to destruction.

NONE can avoid the implicates of the fact that we are members one of another. God has so planned the human family as a solidarity that each life is necessarily the complement of the other. In a world of His ordering, mutual life means mutual service. The measure in which we have departed from this ideal is the record of our selfishness; and it is part, at least, of the message of Christ's Gospel to recall us to that state in which by love we serve one another. The faith which justifies us before God unites us also with His family, and commits us to the duty of serving the highest interests of our fellows. Our love to God is, in this life, only expressible in terms of love to men. Herein is this precept interpreted. There are those about us who cannot plead their own cause before God. Their knowledge of Him is vague and incoherent. They cannot plead His promises, for they do not know them. In regard to all such the ministry of intercession is laid upon us.

All who are redeemed by Christ's Blood are thereby set apart for holy service as "priests unto God." As under the old economy, so now, His priests are doubly representative—bearing before Him the needs of sinful men, and witnessing before them of His Word and purpose. They open their mouths for the dumb, and He promises that their prayer shall not be in vain. For He has endowed intercessory prayer with promises which attach to no other form of Christian service.

All is vanity and vexation of spirit.

THUS does that man declare his conviction, who has sounded the depths of human resource and of earthly delight. Having the opportunity of testing all that life offers to men, he finds that at its very best it lacks the power to satisfy the instinct of his heart. There is something wanting which no amount of mental search or energetic enterprise can supply. All his endeavour to find satisfaction only increases the irritation and restlessness of his spirit. While he gathers certain wisdom with regard to the relative value of things and the wise conduct of human affairs, so that his confession is full of pointed proverb and wholesome counsel, its chief value lies in its implicit admission that nothing but the life and love of God, for Whom he was created, can ever meet the unchanging needs of man's nature.

How different is the conclusion of this ardent seeker after life's good, with that of Him Who came to reveal its true meaning! Everything that Christ taught both confirmed and contradicted this estimate that "all is vanity and vexation of spirit." He confirmed it by His revelation of the utter insufficiency and inability of any man to realize what true life is, apart from the re-creating Spirit of God. He contradicted it by introducing men to a life of pleasantness and peace at His vocation. For He called His followers to find life by losing it. And all who take His way find not vexation but victory, and walk not in gloom but in glorious light.

ECCLESIASTES ii. 12.

What can the man do that cometh after the king?

IN his efforts to realize satisfaction by the study of earth's wisdom and lore the searcher finds himself discouraged at the outset. Others have gone along this same path before him, and with greater facilities for finding all there is to be found. The king, with his unequalled opportunity of gathering whatever fruit is to be gathered, had yet afforded no witness of a satisfied heart. How then could any one else expect to succeed in this quest? The mere fact that royal feet had trodden the path before him without finding satisfaction made it a road of certain disappointment. Such an example imposed the handicap of already determined futility. And who can succeed if he sets out already assured that failure is inevitable?

In the light which Christ has eternally shed, we may well read this query with another significance. For He, the Son of Man, has gone over the road of life before us, being tempted in all points like as we are, submitting to ordinary human limitations and sharing life's hardest lot. The wilderness of the unknown was traversed by Him Who had all knowledge, and Who nevertheless died with the unanswered "Why?" on His lips. What indeed can a man do that cometh after the King? He can find the safe highroad marked out by Feet that once bled. He can realize his kinship with Heaven, and his riches as a son of God. He can find a man's work to do, and strength to do it. And thus he can come to himself and his true life. For it is in the following of the King that every good is ours.

God requireth that which is past.

WE have by no means done with a thing because it is behind our back. To ignore the influence of the past, especially of the sinful past, is to live in a fool's paradise. For the universal law of life is that what is past is not dead, but living. By strange power it always succeeds in getting itself expressed and in reproducing itself in present conduct. Indeed, in its last analysis character is just the sum total of past actions. Try as we will we cannot get away from ourselves. Nor can we get away from God. We may forgive ourselves with easy complacency, excusing our folly and sin with a tolerance which is itself the fruit of our own doings. But the demand of God's law is inexorable. We may avoid anything like sincere self-judgment and may refuse to face the facts of our own record. But one day the secrets of every heart shall be revealed.

There is a stimulating suggestion, in this word, as to God's re-making of men. He transforms the forgiven past of His people into a positive instrument of present grace. Under His power memory becomes a moral and spiritual asset, inspiring sanctifying fear which at once restrains and constrains us. The very consequences of sin which we bear about with us become a battlefield, upon which a man, alert and girded with Truth, can win his soul. It is this aspect of God's Sovereignty, and His use of life's dark things to bring us into light, that for ever forbids doubt as to the ultimate victory of His grace in that great Day.

ECCLESIASTES iv. 10.

Woe to him that is alone when he falleth.

THE benefit of comradeship in the hour of disaster is one of the lessons which life teaches all men. The limits of self-help are soon reached under the stress of misfortune of any kind. When a man has fallen and is unable to raise himself, the presence of a stout heart and strong hand extended to assist him means everything. The most grateful of all life's memories is of experience of the power of human companionship to help us rise again after a fall, and to rebuild after a failure. At the same time we do not always realize this as a ministry of God's grace, though indeed it is. For He has many ways of fulfilling Himself, and it is through human channels that His best gifts ever come to men. The timely succour of a friend in need is often an expression of the love and care of God which, at the time, we fail to recognize as such.

If this is true in regard to the helpful association of human friendship, how much truer is its significance in regard to the comradeship of Christ. It is only when we live with Him, in the companionship to which His Gospel has called us, that we can avoid the final calamity of falling into wilful sin. For when by watchlessness our footsteps well-nigh slip, His mercy is ever at hand to lift us up. He can transform every failure, either of purpose or energy, into the positive inspiration of a new start. Indeed many an one owes all he is to the fact that when he fell he was not alone. On the other hand, to exclude Christ from the fellowship of life is to court certain disaster and irreparable calamity.

When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it.

NONE of us is immune from the peril of insincerity in our dealings with God. It is always easy, under the stress of emotion kindled by His Word and the influence of His Spirit, to make vows which we honestly intend to keep, but which, when the impression of the occasion is past, we find too irksome. It is thus that defection from God frequently begins. When our vows have to be wrought out in diligent self-discipline, in rigorous toil, and in the bearing of the Cross, we often go back from them, forgetting that in so doing we both dishonour the Lord and injure our own souls. For it is certain that the habit of insincerity grows upon those who are profuse in words of consecration but lacking in their fulfilment. Such constitute one of the largest elements of weakness in the Church of God to-day.

We sometimes sing of our desire "to live more nearly as we pray." As a matter of fact, we live exactly as we pray. He who prays thoughtlessly, and utters vows rashly and without consideration of their implicates, will never rise to any worthy level of consistent action. This is the inwardness of Christ's warning to men against unconsidered discipleship. He bade the builder count well the cost of carrying out his plans before he declares them, lest his failure should cover him with shame. And this is the lesson we need to bear in mind every day, lest character should contradict creed, and a low state of spiritual vitality cancel our vows.

ECCLESIASTES vi. 2.

Yet God giveth him not power to eat thereof.

HOW strange is the irony of the situation in which a man who has everything calculated to minister to his happiness, has, at the same time, lost the power of desire. He finds himself starving in the midst of plenty, and poor though surrounded by affluence. By bitter experience he learns that a man's true riches consist not alone in the abundance of the things which he possesses, and that there are things which gold cannot purchase. Such a man is doubly poor, for his material wealth mocks at his spiritual lack, and makes him the more conscious that all things in his life are out of joint. For what is the use of making a living and losing a life? Or of what use are all earth's riches if the power of making them serve life's highest interests is lacking?

What a picture of many is this! Devotion to worldly concerns, and intense eagerness to acquire its wealth, have gradually invaded their spiritual life, until the faculties of discernment and appreciation are entirely atrophied. Thus is the sentence written upon the life of him who is guilty of over-devotion to things temporal. Perversion of moral energy always brings its Nemesis, and the man becomes possessed by his possessions and imprisoned in his narrow interests. In what striking contrast is all this to the experience of those who are linked to Christ in a fellowship of obedience and loyalty! For He has opened, and made available, streams of life which never run dry, and which constantly renew the entire being of those who abide in Him.

God also hath set the one over against the other.

THUS is God's ministry of compensation declared. The balance of life is finely determined to minister to highest purposes in every man. Adversity and prosperity are nicely adjusted, light and darkness are the necessary complement of each other, things straight counterbalance things crooked, and every burden is proportioned to imparted strength. Hence, all who take the long view of life, steadily refusing to judge God by any single experience, are constrained to sing that "He hath done all things well." Those, however, who isolate any experience are bound to miss its meaning, and to become, on the one hand over-confident, and on the other disappointed. Life is a complete whole, generously planned by Him Who is unerring wisdom and undying love.

We all have a tendency to see exclusively that which is nearest, as though it were the only object within the range of vision. And nothing is more likely to spoil life than this. For beyond the clouds the sun is always shining, and over against the seemingly untoward thing God always sets some gift of His love. In every cloud He has lodged His bow. Over against abounding sin He has set abounding grace; against its wages, the gift of God; against human weakness, His strength; against life's perplexities, guidance with His eye; against its toils, His companionship; and against all life's many insecurities, eternity with its fulfilment of every promise and its establishment of every hope. With such a Gospel, how bright is the gladness that should invest our witness and testimony!

ECCLESIASTES viii. 4.

Where the word of a king is, there is power.

THE value of any word depends upon the ability of him who speaks to make it good, whether it be of promise or warning. Behind the word of a monarch is all the strength of his kingdom, so that those who despise His proclamation find themselves involved in an unequal struggle. If this is true in regard to an earthly sovereign, how much more when the word in question is the word of the King of kings. It is from the character and nature of God that His written Word derives its authority, so that all who come into any contact with it come of necessity into contact with Him. To refuse it, is to refuse Him ; to despise it, is to flout Him ; to accept and yield to it, is to prove Him. And here is the test as to the Divine inspiration of the Word which each may apply. By fulfilling the simple conditions which cover all commerce with Heaven, we can prove its power in its transforming effect.

This is the explanation of every conversion. The Word arrests men, arraigns them before the bar of conscience, arouses them to a sense of their lostness and to concern, and assures them also of the free pardon which God ever speaks to the contrite. Surely this is proof enough that it is none other than the word of the King. It moreover speaks to the depths of our hearts in hours of darkness, perplexity, and stress, and lifts them into peace and confidence. Such is the King's power, of which it is the transmitter. With what confidence should we who have anything of this experience proclaim the Word as Christ's ambassadors ! It will prove itself a thousand times as His.

The race is not to the swift nor the battle to the strong.

HUMAN reckoning is always bound to err in the sphere of Divine realities. God lays stress, not upon men's strength as a necessary condition for faithful sonship and service, but upon their weakness. In His Kingdom it is the little ones who are great. For it is into their weak lives that He pours His own strength, and through their surrendered feebleness that He puts forth His mightiest energies. Thus it is that they become swift to run on His errands, and sufficient for fighting in His cause. The strenuousness and length of the way, and the great resources of the foe, are altogether too much for unaided human endeavour. No man is of himself sufficient for the high tasks of the Kingdom. But no man fails who, knowing his own need, casts him upon the great faithfulness of the Lord.

How often do we stand appalled at the magnitude of some duty which we cannot escape, measuring ourselves by its frowning greatness, and feeling utterly unable to undertake it. Fearing to fail, lest by our failure we should dishonour Him, we shrink from making the attempt; and the opportunity goes by for ever, to our condemnation. Whereas if we remembered that every Divine precept presupposes Divine power for its fulfilment, and that God can make us efficient in our attempted obedience, how differently should we act! For it is as we run that we are made swift, and as we fight that we are made strong.

ECCLESIASTES x. 8.

Whoso breaketh an hedge, a serpent shall bite him.

THE eastern walls, built of stones tumbled one upon another, shelter the lair of many poisonous snakes. If inadvertently a man makes a breach in such a hedge, it is more than probable he will be attacked. This obvious fact is used as an illustration of the common law and experience of life. For God has hedged life round with commandments, obligations, and responsibilities which, rightly understood, are our protection from all that would invade life to its hurt. True liberty and safety is to be found only as we abide therein. Once let a man break through the Divine precept and prohibition, violating the laws of purity, truth, or honesty, and he finds himself at once bitten by the deadly serpent whose sting follows wilful sin, and whose bite is fatal. None but Christ can thenceforth take its poison away.

There is a sense, too, in which this word is an exhortation to fearless courage in the doing of God's Will. When any man, at His call, sets out upon the pathway of service, it is morally certain that he will sooner or later have to defy conventionality and do many things which arouse opposition and even enmity. Hissing serpents attack him with malignant tongue in endeavours to silence him for ever. This has always been the history of those who have followed in Christ's train. But in union with Him they, like Paul, have taken up the deadly thing and flung it from them without hurt. For so He has promised.

He that observeth the wind shall not sow; and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap.

THIS is more than a mere maxim regarding the laws of husbandry. It emphasizes the necessity of courageously going on with the duty next to hand when everything seems unfavourable. It is just the Old Testament poetry for the New Testament prose, "Be instant in season and out of season," and is an injunction which all who seek to sow the Good Seed in the name of Christ need to lay to heart. While it is true that some fail from over-rashness, far more fail from over-reasoning. It may be that some are too careless, but far more are too critical of circumstance and convenience in doing the work of Christ. We are apt to forget that the present is the only available hour, and that conscience and the commission laid upon us should together form the determining inspiration of life and service. When it is otherwise with us, we are in great danger of losing the only opportunity we shall ever have of influencing men toward Christ.

None can fail to feel the adverse winds of indifference, of doubt, and of worldliness. And none can be blind to the dark clouds which from time to time hang threateningly. The danger is, however, of observing and regarding these things to the point of imagining that nothing can be done profitably under such conditions, and of deferring obedience until brighter skies are above us and gentler winds blow. Whereas, if, in entire disregard of every frowning circumstance, we go on sowing the Seed in a spirit of self-sacrificing devotion, we shall find that the clouds when they break drop fatness, and that the winds are God's reinforcement of our energies. He never fails to give the increase when His glory is the moving consideration of the sower.

Fear God, and keep His commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.

THIS is the conclusion of all the reasoning, and of the study of life, to which the Preacher has given himself. The ultimate good of every man is bound up in his acknowledgment of the beneficent sovereignty of God. Love based upon respect for His character, and fear based upon love, together form the attitude in which His people must live if they are to realize life to the full. For the fear of God co-ordinates every interest, and sets up in life a central control which solves every perplexity and cuts a pathway through every tangle. The man who puts God first, in all his thoughts and ways, will find that His commandments are not grievous. They are not burdens but benefits, not weights but wings.

We must always bear in mind that every such precept as this, which comprises the whole duty of man, presupposes for its accomplishment the Heavenly enduements to which God has pledged Himself in Christ. He never intended us to be equal to life apart from the strength which is made perfect in weakness. Its frowning duties and inexorable demands are all meant to drive us to the Secret Place with the plea which comes from self-knowledge. And there we find that He answers the surrender of life to the purpose of His Will by asserting Himself in power to cleanse from everything extraneous and to impart everything lacking. This is the secret of the life which is life indeed. There is no other way of essential holiness,—and it is open to all the children of God.

They made me the keeper of the vineyards; but mine own vineyard have I not kept.

THUS does the bride who has lost the immediate consciousness of love's communion find, in herself, the cause. Busily engaged in carrying out the duties of her calling, she has neglected the garden of her own soul. She has become so absorbed in things that have to be done for the eye of others, as to drift into indifference regarding the well-spring of her own peace and joy. Happily she awakens to her condition while yet there is time to remedy it, and, superseding every other interest by this main one of re-establishing communion with the beloved, she makes search of him who is all the time seeking her. This is the thesis of the entire Song. Broken communion may be renewed, and lost happiness may be brought back, but only as the whole energy is devoted to the search. Recovery is not effected by any mere half-heartedness.

Almost more than anything else this describes the state of many earnest Christians. They become so busy with the work of the Vineyard as to have little time for heart communion with Christ. Activities multiply while adoring worship declines. The field of service enlarges while the Sanctuary contracts. It is possible, indeed, that the whole world is gained —in the best sense—while the soul is lost to its true and sanctifying purpose. We do not need to spend less energy in Christ's service, but we do need to spend more time in His presence. And in this, as in all things, His own earthly life is our pattern. The busiest Man Who ever lived was the most prayerful, and the most constant in His union with Heaven.

SONG OF SOLOMON ii. 2.

As the lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters.

THIS is at once the bridegroom's rapturous appreciation of his bride and his true conception of the nature of her life. Surrounded by hostile influence and threatening hindrance, she yet grows unsullied and unscathed, shedding her fragrance and revealing her beauty in the most unlovely and unkindly environment. Just as close-growing thorns cannot choke the life nor mar the beauty of the lily which grows in their midst, so the influences of the world are utterly unable to deform the one whose roots run deep into the soil of love, and whose life is governed and controlled by holy passion.

What a picture is this of the Christian whose life is nourished from above and within, and not from anything of surrounding circumstance. When Christ said " Consider the lilies of the field how they grow," He was insisting upon this same thing, just as He exemplified it in Himself. For His life of peerless beauty and fragrant purity was lived in the thorny environment of Nazareth, with its unsympathetic and misunderstanding inhabitants, and in the unbelieving hostility of Capernaum and Jerusalem. There it was that He shed Heaven's influence on friend and foe alike. And there, too, His people must grow in grace. For every true Christian life is thorn-hedged. But over such the thorns have no power. There is, in the very nature of their new life, a quality which defies every hostile influence, converting it, indeed, into positive blessing and opportunity of proving Heaven's promises.

I will seek him whom my soul loveth.

WHEN the darkness of night enwraps the soul, creating a chill sense of distance from Him we love, the only thing to do is to emulate the forlorn bride and to rise up and make diligent search. For He is not afar off from us. Even in that same hour He is seeking His Blood-bought. Nothing arbitrary nor resentful is causing Him to hide His face. That which makes the darkness is in ourselves, and must be dealt with by our own hand before we can know again the joys of communion. Nor will we have to seek long nor far before it is made plain to us why His presence has been withdrawn. It would be a denial of His very nature to imagine that He should make the way of restoration unnecessarily difficult. Many waters cannot quench His love nor can the floods drown it.

What most of us lack in such circumstances is the preliminary determination to have things put right at any cost. Over the soul that declines from the way of communion with God a kind of lethargy steals, which seems to divest intention of energy, leaving it indeterminate. Thus it is that sincere self-confession has often no power of energetic action, and frequently ends with a settled state of acquiescence in things as they are. What a warning this should be to any of us who realize distance from Christ, which up to now we have not begun to traverse. Life itself depends upon stirring ourselves up to seek Him.

Come with me . . . look from the top.

IT is only in union with the Beloved that the bride can look upon the threatening foes and dangers of life without fear. Left to herself the lions and leopards would paralyse her courage by their roaring ; but with Him she is not at all affrighted. Perfect love casts out every apprehension of evil, and renews itself with every experience of fellowship. It is well to note, however, that in the communion of perfect love dangers are not eliminated from life. They have to be faced and met, but never with inadequate resource. " Come with Me " is at once an invitation and an assurance that " nothing shall by any means harm you."

It is characteristic of union with Christ that it brings a new elevation into life. With Him we learn to see earthly things from Heavenly heights. Viewed from thence, great things lose their terrifying bigness and their power to turn us back. With Him, " seated in Heavenly places far above all," the storms and thunders of earth are beneath us ; while overhead is the clear blue of Heaven. Away in the distance, as Moses viewed the promised land from Pisgah, we behold the land that is very far off, and are encouraged to fearless pilgrimage. How different will life look for us to-day, if we see it not from our own level, but from the height from which Christ views it ! It is this elevation of vision which marks His disciples out from among the men of the world who live for the things they see around them, and become enslaved by them. The view " from the top " sets the beholder gloriously free.

My soul failed when He spake.

HOW entirely does this describe and explain the coldness and waywardness of many a life which once knew the gladness of intimacy with the Lord! Some word of His, challenging faith and loyalty, found the heart unprepared—albeit the conscience was ready. And darkness was the result. For when He tests us by some opportunity of service, it is only that through it we may reach to fuller companionship with Himself. When He speaks, it is to declare an ever-deepening vocation. When we fail, either because the way is too rough, the ascent too steep, or the demand too far-reaching, we fail indeed.

While some failure is beyond repair, it is the gracious work of His Spirit to bring again and again to our remembrance the things He has spoken to us, even those things in which we have failed to respond arightly. And this He does, not to taunt and vex us, but to give us assurance of recovery on the old terms of confession, and repentance, and obedience. It is blessedly possible for the one who failed when the Lord spake, to get back into the circle of His fellowship by the same door as that by which he left it Only remember, that in this, as in all our dealings with Heaven, we must be specific. The sin which has broken in upon communion must be explicitly confessed and sincerely forsaken. We do not recover ourselves along the road of mere generalities. And just at the place of our shameful failure, the truly penitent soul discovers a Fountain, and a great Light, and an outstretched welcoming Hand.

SONG OF SOLOMON vi. 3.

I am my Beloved's, and my Beloved is mine.

THIS is the sum of all good—to be possessed of and to possess an overmastering love. Despite all her fluctuations of loyalty, and her uncertainty of purpose, there yet persists in the heart of the bride an assurance that he who loves her is not thereby turned from her. Such is his character that she cannot believe that her shortcoming should in any way cancel his affection. For, whenever she has realized most strongly her need of his supporting sympathy and strength, she has experienced his ever-ready nearness. Thus the song of her heart, born in the depths of an experience of shame and pain, is that she belongs to him, and that he has committed himself to her for weal or woe, for time and eternity. This is the light which chases away for ever all her gloom.

It is thus, too, that Christ's love remains constant despite all our proved unworthiness. Through much sinning and human failure, through weak surrender to things which we promised to forswear for ever, through seasons of doubt and prayerlessness, His affection never wavers. Through all, He graciously gives us intimations of His faithfulness—sometimes by allowing us to reap the fruit of our own folly and to suffer some degree of the consequence of our defection. But ever and anon He convinces us that He changes not, and that we are as dear to Him as on the day He first found us. With unfaltering confidence we may still call Him ours. For He still entrusts to us the honour of His Name and the work of His Kingdom.

Let us go forth into the field.

LOVE can never wholly satisfy its own instincts by mere selfish communion. Its delights soon pall if they are mere expressions of self-indulgence. Only when two lives flow together in mutual interest, and maintain together the fellowship of some worthy task, does affection between them grow and deepen with the days. It is not in the house but in the field that the bride really comes to know her beloved. Comradeship in the exigencies of life in the open tempers the link which binds them, as steel is tempered by heat and cold. It is not in the sheltered cloister, but on the field of action that hearts are made strong in each other's love.

How full of meaning is Christ's invitation to His people to go forth, not merely for Him but with Him, into the field of the world's need! For it declares not only His use of their consecrated lives, but His own desire also for deeper fellowship with them. It is to the one who gladly leaves the comforts of the sheltered life, forsaking if need be father and mother, houses and lands, for His sake and the Gospel's, that He imparts Himself in sanctifying power. They know most of His love who brave most in His fellowship. What a call then is the duty of every day to go forth with Him to the field! To recognize this as His summons, is to convert every irksome thing into a chalice of Heaven brimming with holy delights. But they who hang back when He calls, consulting their own convenience and self-interest, lose the entire meaning of life.

Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it.

THIS is the attesting mark of all true love, that it is victorious over all that is opposed to its purpose, and that it cannot be quenched, as every other sentiment may be, by the treatment with which it meets. How clearly is this seen in the love of a parent for his child, which persists in spite of every unworthiness and ingratitude! Rarer, but not less beautiful, is the love of a man for his friend, which refuses to alter although it is strained to the utmost. Indeed, it seems to be in the very nature of love to call forth sentiments as unlike itself as can well be imagined. In a world like this it is always on the rack. But it has indomitable courage, and refuses to strike its standard however many and strong are its opposing circumstances.

Since all human love is but a broken reflection of the great love of God in Christ, it is of Him that these words are most true. With what ingratitude does His love meet in the lives it seeks to bless! How many are the floods of human sin and pride and hatred which play upon its flame in vain! Having loved His own who are in the world He loves them to the end; even though this involves such treatment at their hands. And when, soul-wearied and sin-tired, they turn to Him almost in despair of finding any good, how strong and bright is the fire at which chilled hearts are warmed into life. What an encouragement to faith, and what a theme for testimony, is the everlasting love of God!

To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto Me?

THIS forms the centre of the Divine indictment of Israel. Religious worship was punctiliously observed, the altars reeked with the blood of sacrifice, the temple courts were trampled by the feet of many worshippers but there was no sincerity in the worship. Vital religion had never reached a lower ebb. The people honoured God with their lips, but their heart was far from Him. And it is this that constitutes the gravamen of the charge against them. For their every action contradicted their profession of faith. From one end of the land to the other there was compromise and unreality. Material prosperity—as it often does—went hand in hand with this state of moral decadence, and strengthened the people in their own false confidence. And their offence was aggravated by loud protestations of orthodoxy. Is it to be wondered at that the God of Truth could no longer forbear?

Israel's sin is strangely amongst us to-day. Ritualism without reality, and wickedness cloaked by worship, is all too common. Men think that God can be propitiated by correctness of demeanour in His House, and firm adherence—even to the point of championship—to the letter of His Word. They concern themselves with the externals of religion without giving any place in their lives to its spirit. And God still launches upon such His challenge: "To what purpose?" The answer of conscience and of the Word is never uncertain. Unreality has but one end.

ISAIAH ii. 5.

Come ye, and let us walk in the light of the Lord.

THE prophet speaks to a people who have accustomed themselves to moral half-lights. Turning from God and their faith in Him to foreign alliances and strange gods, they have lost the light of His presence and all its beneficence. They might be rich as wealth is counted in the world; but such prosperity as theirs is often but the decoration of spiritual destitution. For when a people loses the sense of God's presence and the light of his favour, nothing compensates. To such the prophetic call comes as a summons to regain all they had lost by drawing near to Him Whom they had forsaken. Obedience to such an invitation is never without cost or without pain. It involves entire renunciation of the things that have seduced the soul, and demands the displacement of much that has usurped the Divine control. But it is unerring direction.

To walk in the light of the Lord involves submission to His searching gaze. In His light all unholiness is made manifest, so that the man who stands under the fiery glance knows himself as otherwise were impossible. Thank God, His is not merely the light of abstract truth, or otherwise life under its tests would be insupportable. It is "the light of the Lord"; and where He is, not only self-revelation but self-recovery is made possible. For with the light is given the cleansing Blood, which makes and keeps clean the soul that seeks to walk in obedience to all the apprehended Will of Heaven. This is the path which shines more and more unto the perfect day. It is open and free to us all.

Say ye to the righteous, that it shall be well with him.

IN the certain destruction which is to come upon Jerusalem by reason of its sin—which destruction Isaiah portrays as vividly as only a man can who has stood in the secret of the Lord—the righteous among the people shall be delivered. Otherwise the Divine character of justice and righteousness would be impugned. For even in the apostate city there were some who had not defiled their garments. Surrounded by all manner of evil, and tempted to yield to the popular drift away from God, they yet preserved fellowship with Him, resisting the evil and persevering in their efforts to live worthily. This evidence of faith in His Word God could never overlook. Having committed themselves to Him, He would surely keep them from evil in the day of His judgments.

To-day's conditions are analogous. The people of God are a little flock in the midst of a world which lieth in the Wicked One, and which in the nature of the case will not get better but worse as the end of the Age draws near. But those who love Him, and who, because they love Him, keep His commandments and look for His Appearing, shall not pass through the tribulation which is to be the world's portion. Long ere the storm breaks, He will appear to their joy; and, while the world rocks, the beloved of the Lord shall dwell in safety by Him. It is for that Day, and that holy fellowship of Heaven, that every hard-wrought righteousness is a preparation.

ISAIAH iv. 5.

Upon all the glory shall be a defence.

THE outstanding feature of Jerusalem's restoration after all the judgments of God had passed upon her, was to be the renewed presence of the Lord. In former days the cloud of glory had rested upon the nation in its pilgrimage. The glory of God had dwelt between the outstretched wings of the Cherubim above the Mercy-Seat. These had spoken to the people of the Lord's near presence and of His sanctifying power. The deepest and most intimate experiences of their life, personal and national, had been bound up with all which this cloud represented. And in declaring that when His purifying work should be completed, and Jerusalem should once again be the place of His delight, the glory of God should rest upon it, the prophet was but declaring that their most sacred hopes should all be fulfilled. The Lord would do better things for them than at their beginnings. What had been, at best, local and temporary should be general and abiding. God should be in the midst of her, and she should not be moved.

Has this word no significance for present Christian life, especially having regard to Christ's promises to be with His people "always, even unto the end of the age"? Does it not enjoin upon us the necessity of submitting to every discipline of the Spirit, that by His purifying power our lives may be made ready and fit for fellowship with the Holy One? For there must needs be an increasing correspondence between the character of the Lord and of His disciples if they are to know all the help, the defence, and the glory of union with Him. We fail too often to realize the promises of His love because we fail to fit ourselves for a comradeship of holiness and truth.

What could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done in it?

GOD had blessed Israel with everything necessary to her fruitfulness of life. All conditions of environment were carefully chosen with a view to securing the glory of God in her life and witness. Far from realizing His expectations, however, the Divine Husbandmen found upon her branches nothing but the wild grapes of self-will. In what is almost a wail of disappointment He challenges His people as to the cause of this state of things. Nor have they any answer to His searching word. For the fact of His unvarying ministry of love robs them of every possible excuse. The very memory of the blessings He recalls to their mind is their condemnation.

How often in human life has God to utter this same challenging query! Having given His best, in the Person of Christ, in order that sinful men might be redeemed from every unworthy thing, His expectation of fruitfulness is entirely justified. But just as Israel failed to respond to every beneficent influence with which she was surrounded, so men to-day fail to respond to the Divine gift and claim. They simply refuse to yield them to the grace which would transform. And, when indifference has hardened into contempt, even God Himself can do no more for their salvation. He could, of course, break down the recalcitrant will by the exercise of omnipotent strength; but this would be to take from men that power of choice which is the arbiter of destiny. The fact is that the fruitless life is so, not because God's grace is not sufficient, but because the will is alienated from Him.

ISAIAH vi. 1.

I saw also the Lord.

KING Uzziah had been Isaiah's patron. His ministry hitherto had been carried out under the royal protection and favour; and now, when the sovereign is dead, darker days and harder times may well be in store for him whose business in life it is to declare the message of God to His people. It would not have been inexcusable had a mood of depression seized upon him as the difficulties of the situation were recognized. But in that same hour of grief and anxiety, and it may be of disappointed plans also, he "saw also the Lord." He had learned to look not only on the things that are seen, but on the eternal things that are not seen. His vision had been trained in ordinary days to look beyond mere circumstances to the God Who controlled every situation. It was enough for him to see the face, and have the approving smile of his Master.

Herein is the secret of abiding inspiration in changing days. To all of us there come experiences similar to that of Isaiah, when earthly props are removed and supplementary aids to faithfulness are taken away. If we can then see "also the Lord," nothing shall move us from the steadfastness of our purpose. This is the vision which cancels all untoward influence of disappointed hope and overwhelming calamity. The knowledge that He abides faithful encourages us to rise above every seeming frustration, and in calm faith to "carry on." How often, alas, are we so blinded by that which is close at hand as to lose all sight of the sun beyond the clouds, and all realization of our Lord's presidency over life! It is only "to them that look for Him" that He ever appears.

Take heed, and be quiet; fear not, neither be faint-hearted.

THIS message of heartening comfort, entrusted to the prophet for declaration to King Ahaz, is at the centre of a remarkable interpretation of the embarrassing circumstances which challenged his courage. The two powerful kings of Syria and Israel were in alliance against the capital city, and were threatening its existence. It seemed to the best human judgment as though their combined strength must prevail. But God was on the side of His people. And the king was thus urged to strengthen his confidence in Him. The situation had not got out of hand, though it might seem so. God was really in control, and the opposing forces were already doomed. Strong in his own consciousness of the Divine faithfulness, Isaiah was able thus to allay the king's panic, and through him to steady the people.

Circumstances similar to these frequently reconstruct themselves in the experience of God's people. There come times when a combination of forces threaten their peace, and even their existence. Yet how needless it is to let our hearts be troubled if we really believe in God. For He is behind all circumstance, and nothing reaches us except at the permission of His love and wisdom. We need to take more earnest heed to the promises of the Covenant, and to seek the quiet of the Sanctuary. Then we shall lose all fear of evil tidings, and shall resolutely face every oncoming foe. Like Isaiah we, too, shall be able to communicate to others the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God.

For the Lord spake thus to me with a strong hand.

IT is full of meaning that the prophet should declare that the secret of God was imparted to him under a strong sense of the Divine control. Not only did the voice of God declare the message he was in turn to speak to the Nation, but the hand of God was so laid upon him that he could not get away from the narrow path of obedience. While the message of God stirred his heart, the power of God controlled also his impulses, creating the disposition of loyal surrender and empowering him for all its implicates. It is this consciousness which makes any man the servant and messenger of the Lord—not only that he has heard the word arightly, but that he has experienced the miracle of transformation within himself. Such an one becomes fearlessly irresistible.

Sometimes the strong hand with which the Lord speaks to His servants is the arrangement of their circumstances. He so hedges up the way of life that there is for them but one open pathway. Happy is that man who knows himself thus, without question, to be in the way of His commandments. Sometimes it is an inward conviction which nothing can shake, and which makes it impossible to take any direction but one apart from the protest of an outraged conscience. And sometimes when the message in question concerns life in its vital relationship, the strong hand of the Lord weakens our strength in the way, until, like Jacob at Peniel, we can no longer wrestle, but must cling and cry. And it is then that the same hand of the Lord works with us, confirming His Word by signs following. How wise we are when we yield unresistingly to the unerring guidance of a Love too wise to err, and too good to be unkind!

Of the increase of His government and peace there shall be no end.

THUS does the prophet foretell the reign of the coming Messiah. Upon a world at war with God, He should come, in the fulness of time, to bring its strife to an end, to harmonize all its discordant elements, and to reconcile its peoples to Heaven. What the prophet saw but dimly, and could apprehend but imperfectly, we know with certitude in the light of the Evangel. Not yet do we see all things put under Him, and the world at peace. But we see Him crowned on the throne of highest Heaven and of humblest heart alike. And we know the peace that issues from His rule.

The conjunction of His government and His peace is no artificial one; for it is the experience of all who enthrone Him that He deals with every cause of disturbance—perplexity as well as uneasiness of conscience, bondage to evil habit as well as stain of past transgression, weakness of will as well as perversity of nature. All these things which from time to time disturb the calm and confidence of His people, really summon them to completer surrender to His power. And as the borders of His Kingdom within us are extended, so the influence of His presence is increasingly experienced. As we hearken to His commandments, and do them with enlarging apprehension of their meaning, peace increases like the silent flow of a deep, strong river; until one day, when all things shall truly be put under Him, we shall know its entire perfection. This will be the joy of Heaven.

ISAIAH x. 3.

What will ye do in the day of visitation?

THE moral deterioration of the people presaged certain calamity when a really big test should come upon them. In days of ease their religious life had been sapped by worldliness, and their professed allegiance to God nullified by their foreign alliances. While preserving an outward semblance of strength the real life of the people was so deteriorate that any great strain must bring them to utter overthrow. And to the prophet's vision the day of test was not far distant. Israel might look upon God as being complacent in regard to their defection. In the fulness of time, however, His righteousness would declare itself in their judgment; and the prophet seeks therefore to convict them of their utter lack of any mora reserve which could establish them in the visitation which they could not evade.

It is always true that in ordinary days men are preparing themselves for those critical hours which come, unexpected and unheralded, to try the deepest foundations of life. Silently but surely we are all accumulating moral strength or moral weakness which is brought to light when a great sorrow, a fierce temptation, or a high duty searches the soul. It is then that the secret things are revealed and the hidden things made known. The day of our visitation, however it comes, neither makes us heroes nor cowards. It simply finds and reveals us thus. How carefully, therefore, should we live, in the light of the unknown day which will surely dawn for us all without warning.

An ensign of the people . . . his rest shall be glorious.

THIS is part of Isaiah's prediction of the Coming of Christ. He sees a standard erected to which all nations should flock, and Him Whose Name it bears working with energy for the reclamation of the world's lost life, and never ceasing until the glory of God is thus accomplished. No lesser ideal is to animate the coming Messiah than that of a world overspread with the light of the knowledge of the glory of God. This is His programme in broad outline; and hence He is the Hope not only of men but of nations. In Him alone will Israel find her true existence.

We see the fulfilment of this wherever the Standard of the Gospel is raised. Christ takes possession of those who come to Him, and works in them toward their complete renewal unto the Will of God. By His indwelling Spirit He imparts a new impulse and fervour which becomes the unsleeping energy of the new life. For to live to the glory of God—which is the chief end alike of our creation and redemption—necessitates an earnest endeavour to renounce all that His Will condemns and to accomplish all that His Will commands. Nor does Christ withdraw from any co-operating soul the strength of His own Spirit till we are perfect in His likeness. His rest is the glory of God. But He rests from His work only when it is accomplished. How much there is yet to be wrought in us ere He sees of the travail of His soul and is satisfied. And how whole-hearted should be our obedience to His every intimation.

ISAIAH xii. 3.

With joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation.

ISAIAH thus foretold the song of a delivered people, the praise that should rise from Israel's heart in the day when God had subdued all her foes, and had once again made His dwelling-place with His people. The consciousness that His anger is turned away from them, and that their time of punishment is at an end, will then inspire them to grateful thanksgiving. They will recognize in the pain of their sore discipline its directing love, and will know that in faithfulness He has afflicted them for their good. New confidence in His mercy will possess them ; nor will they again fear to trust Him or fail through dread of the cost of loyalty. And this new impulse shall not be sustained merely by memory. The Lord's presence and faithfulness shall be to them as wells from which they shall daily draw new inspiration and courage. The sustenance of their new life, like its creation, shall be His doing.

It is alone the satisfied heart that sings. Those who find in Christ the fountain of living water whose springs fail not, cannot but rejoice in Him. From their experience they distil an evangel. They proclaim His mercy and summon others to its blessedness, because of what He is to themselves. For the living streams cleanse their conscience, staunch their wounds, and quench their deepest thirst. How then can they be silent while others in the same need know Him not ? It is ever the song of those who draw from the wells of salvation that leads thirsty souls to "stoop down and drink and live."

I have commanded My sanctified ones.

ALL who carry out God's Will, whether of determined purpose or unwittingly, are regarded as His sanctified ones. In this case it was the Persian army which was to carry out the mission of Divine judgment against Babylon. Whatever had been the knowledge of God's moral requirement which had come to her peoples, they had utterly failed to regard it. In pride and haughtiness they had flouted Him, and in their mighty strength had regarded themselves as immune from any punitive consequence. The prophet declares, however, that their day is coming. God is not unrighteous to forget, nor is He limited, as to the instruments of His wrath, to those who are His avowed people. Hence, Babylon is to fear not the weak and despised Israel, but the overwhelming army of a strange power which should move upon them at God's direction.

Apart from the lesson of the certainty of Heaven's judgment upon earth's wilfulness, this message to Babylon sets forth the fundamental truth of God's ordering of His people's lives. He lays His commands upon all those who are truly sanctified in Christ Jesus, and it is their first responsibility to be unswervingly true to all they apprehend of His Will. For it is through them that His purposes, both of judgment and deliverance, are alike wrought out. He depends upon their co-operation. How urgent, then, is the necessity of our attentive hearing and trustful obedience, lest we hinder His plans!

ISAIAH xiv. 3.

The Lord shall give thee rest from thy sorrow, and from thy fear, and from the hard bondage.

WITH the Babylonian power broken, Israel is to be restored to its own land. From being a nation of slaves, the people are once again to dwell at peace in the security of God's protecting care. Their hard lot will be exchanged for days of peace. With their lessons learned in the school of adversity, they will once again be free to fashion their lives in the fear of the Lord. They who had been cast off will know the joy of the Divine adoption. It was with this bright picture that the prophet sought to lift their hearts and stimulate their faith. By reminding them of the unchanged goodness of the Lord, he sought to bring them to repentance. The persistence of His care was the one great fact of which he personally never lost sight. And now, as always, he declared it to them with the intent of arousing them to renew their forsaken vows.

What a true picture of the blessings of the Gospel is this ! All Israel's experiences of God's power were at best but an anticipation of the blessing which should come in the fulness of time, through Christ, upon the whole world. He alone can give, in the entirety of their meaning, rest after weariness, joy after sorrow, courage after fearfulness, and liberty after bondage. And all those who come to know Him thus must declare Him in lives of service and songs of thanksgiving. It is thus that His redeemed become His authentication.

My heart shall cry out for Moab.

AGAINST Moab the prophet has to declare a heavy burden. God's sore judgment is to come upon that people, and the picture of its execution is one of unrelieved blackness. The consequence of Moab's sin is dire indeed ; and like a true messenger of the Lord, Isaiah takes nothing from its severity, but speaks as he is bidden. At the same time, his heart is moved with pity for those upon whom the punishment of the nation's evil must fall. He knows something of the grief and suffering which will come upon them, and as one who has in some degree come to know and to share the mind of the Lord, he is moved with compassion for those whose sentence he must declare.

How easy it is for us who are charged by Christ's commission not only to declare the love of God but the severities also of His judgments, to speak the truth without love ! And how frequently we do so. It was not thus that He Himself declared the evils that should come upon a world which rejected Him. It was not thus that He cried woe upon those who plotted against His life. It was not thus with unfeeling heart, but with a voice broken with sobs, that He declaimed against those who would not receive Him. And fellowship with Him inevitably produces men of His own type. It is always enough for the servant that he be as his Master, especially in regard to the ministry of denunciation. We can only exercise it—Christianly—with tears.

ISAIAH xvi. 3.

Take counsel, execute judgment.

THIS is part of the practical direction as to repentance and moral amendment given to the people of Moab. Although the righteous sentence of God has been declared upon their transgression there is yet opportunity for them to recover themselves by taking up the things they have neglected, and by thus acknowledging their desire to accept the Divine rule. If they would take counsel with themselves, communing with their own heart, searching out their ways, and sincerely determining to repair the moral evils in their common life, the reality of their purpose should be counted as righteousness to them, and God's anger should be averted. The faith of any nation is only expressible in the practical terms of similar social amendment.

God's ways are never arbitrary nor unequal. Those who, upon conviction of their shortcoming, set themselves to work righteousness and to put away sin, are always accepted of Him. And when either nation or men anoint their eyes thus with eye-salve they open them upon the living Christ. Apart from His grace no amendment can be complete; for no human strength can ever be sufficient to the task. How glorious, however, is the Gospel which not only enjoins imperative command but inspires dynamic sufficiency. It makes our headstrong folly utterly inexcusable, when we affect to justify our own ways by falling back on our native weakness. For He counsels us unto strength if we will but hearken and obey.

Thou . . . hast not been mindful of the Rock of thy strength.

THE pride and self-sufficiency of Israel had been her ruin. In defiance of God's command she had entered into alliance with Syria to resist the Assyrian aggression; and trusting thus in the arm of flesh she could not but fail. From the vantage point of his fellowship with God, Isaiah saw the ultimate issue of the nation's present departure from His Word; and, as a true patriot, did not hesitate to lift up his voice against the courses which could only end disastrously. Living near to God by no means makes the prophet a recluse. He rather lives all the closer to the needs and conditions of his day, because he sees what is their inevitable outcome, and because he knows the only way of averting it. Forgetful Israel must be recalled to a remembrance of the mercies of God, or she is utterly lost.

With what strange force does this word come to our own hearts. For how often are we unmindful of the Rock of our strength! Past experience of His help, which should make us increasingly humble as the difficulties and tasks of life become greater, is too frequently forgotten. We fancy ourselves strong enough until we grievously fall under some unexpected test. This is the tragedy of all neglected prayer and of all careless self-sufficiency. It is against this far-reaching evil that this Word of the Lord warns us. For its consequence is the same in every age and to every people.

ISAIAH xviii. 4.

For so the Lord said unto me, I will take My rest.

IN the midst of the hurrying tumult of the nations which the prophet sees is about to take place, he interposes a contrast between the impetuousness of human energy and the calm patience of God. He is not inactive, for, all unknown to themselves, the nations are in His hands. He can restrain or hasten them at His own Will. But He waits until the very moment when His intervention may effect the highest moral ends. Men might ask: "Why does God not assert Himself?" And they might imagine that the welter of war was divorced from any Divine control. In the fulness of time, however, He would show who is the only Potentate.

The slowness of God is often a mystery to us. Things in our own lives and in the world around us seem to demand His presence and action. Yet He tarries. The storm rages and threatens to engulf the interests of His Kingdom, and, though it is the fourth watch of the night, He does not come. "Why is it?" we ask, not in faith but almost in petulant unbelief. For did we but remember that He sits above the waterfloods, and that He sees the end from the beginning, we should know that deliverance will come not one moment too soon, and not one moment too late. It is this sure knowledge which gives us courage to bear ourselves worthily while the conflict lasts. When we have no deep sense of peace within ourselves, it steadies us to know that He is the God of Peace, and that time is His servant.

A blessing in the midst of the land.

LOOKING forward to the day of Israel's redemption, when she should take the place among the other nations which God purposes for her, Isaiah declares that she shall then be an instrument of blessing to them. The discipline to which she has been subjected, often severe and painful, the gifts by which she has been enriched, and the endowments with which she has been entrusted, have all been directed toward establishing her fitness for this service. True, there have been times when it seemed as though her sin had brought her mission to an utter end. But the prophet declares that God has not forsaken her, and that she shall yet recover the privilege she has forfeited. The day will surely come when she shall be His witness indeed.

So, too, it is with our human lives. Created and redeemed for God's glory, that we might be His witnesses and give an interpretation of Him to the world, we are too often found living unto ourselves, without any thought of the reflex action of our influence upon His honour. Yet He does not leave nor forsake us. The very consequence of our unfaithfulness is turned to disciplinary account. The fires we kindle with our own hands are transformed into His purifying agents to burn away the dross of our character, and to make us vessels meet for His use. It is as though His infinite tenderness pursues us until we are forced to acknowledge again the purpose to which we, at the first, declared our loyalty. Then it is that He fills us with His Spirit, to make us a blessing in the midst of the land.

ISAIAH XX. 2.

And he did so.

IT was a strange command that the Lord laid upon His servant, and one for which there was no precedent. Yet such was His trust in the wisdom of God, and such his loyal obedience, that for three years he walked naked and barefoot throughout the land. Whether at the time he understood the prophetic significance of the injunction may be open to question. For not always can men understand the needs-be of His Word. Indeed, since it is His Word it must always be beyond the measure of our comprehension. And it is our obligation loyally to carry out the command which we only imperfectly understand, but which we entirely trust.

The way in which a man deals with what he knows to be the Word of the Lord is a revelation of his true life. Some accept it joyfully, admiring its beauty, and acknowledging its force, but without yielding themselves to its injunction. Others bring to it the intention of their minds—which for the moment satisfies conscience, but which they never translate into obedient action. It is relatively few who, like the prophet, take the risks of faith and loyalty. But it is this few through whom the work of the Kingdom is carried out. The call to adventurous discipleship—which is bound to bring us into conflict with worldly conceptions and conventions—causes the large majority of professing Christians to draw back. Yet herein is the secret of all fruitfulness of life and effectiveness of service. Heaven is ever waiting for the man of whom it can truly be said—" he did so."

Go, set a watchman, let him declare what he seeth.

THE true prophet is not merely one who foretells things to come but who tells forth things that he has seen. Called into fellowship with God, his vision is thereby quickened and his ears made sensitive. He sees the Divine Will at work in and through human events, and hears the Divine voice above earth's tumults. From his watch-tower he is thus able to come down amongst the people and interpret to them the true inwardness of their circumstances. He does not offer opinions, but declares eternal truth. He carries in his hand the measuring line, and whether men will hear, or whether they will forbear, they cannot avoid its judgment. Such have in all ages been the messengers of God.

The call to-day is for watchmen who will themselves enter into the fellowship of Christ, with a view to serving Him and the interests of His Kingdom amongst men. And from none who are willing to give themselves utterly to this service is the anointing of the seer withheld. Men may be prophets whom none would ever recognize as preachers. Their qualification is not that of learning or eloquence but of knowledge of the Lord and of burning passion for His enthronement in the life of His redeemed world. In view of the need all around us, how ready should be the response to His call of those who know Him in any degree. It may mean the reconstruction of life and the readjustment of interests to the necessities of a great task. But the compensating glory of its outcome who can estimate?

ISAIAH xxii. 11.

Ye have not looked unto the Maker thereof.

BESET by hostile invasion the people of Jerusalem feverishly gave themselves to schemes of defence. They fortified the walls of the city by breaking down the houses and making bulwarks of the material. They cut a conduit to secure the water supply in case of a siege. They did indeed everything that human experience and prudence suggested. But they did not turn to the Lord. Hence their military preparations proved insufficient; and like a resistless tide the invader swept away their defences. Had they not forsaken the Lord, the Assyrian could have had no power over them. Strong, however, in their own fancied strength, and regarding their own energies as sufficient, they were overthrown.

Jerusalem's mistake is constantly repeated by men who find themselves in difficult circumstances. They deal with second causes, and forget Him Who is behind every circumstance and above every difficulty. We are all apt to get into a panic when threatening things seem to make life impossible, and to pit our strength against them, forgetting that deliverance comes alone from the Lord. When His people are beguiled into making their preparations, either of defence or offence, without prayer for His counsel and strength, certain disaster is ahead of them. To do nothing but pray in life's emergencies is, of course, sheer fanaticism. On the other hand, to do nothing but toil is foolish presumption. The safe way for us all is to pray as we work, and to work as we pray. For it is thus that arms are made strong to wield the sword of the Spirit and feet shod to tread down the adversary.

The Lord of hosts hath purposed it.

THE evil that should come upon Tyre was not to be regarded as the work of her foes, although doubtless there were many who were jealous of her eminence in commerce and of her outstanding prosperity. It was the purpose of God, Who designed them to punish Tyre for her proud contempt of Him, and to humble the men who exalted themselves against His rule. There need be no astonishment that He should so visit her people in judgment, for His action is ever consistent with His character. The only true interpretation of life's providence is moral. His severities are never arbitrary, but are always the consequence of flouting His law. This history of His judgments on the several nations of Isaiah's day establishes the certainty of His righteousness and His unfailing consistency.

We can never treat life lightly if we are constantly reminded that God takes note of all our doings and estimates their moral significance unerringly. And at the same time, it is impossible to rail against what seems misfortune if we know that it is nothing less than love's kindliest voice. To accept calamity and disaster thus is to be enriched beyond all human thought. For it inspires repentance and prayer, it assures pardon and cleansing, and it animates energetic amendment. Herein is rest, to know that God in Christ purposes our highest good, and that all things work together to this end in them that love Him.

Glorify ye the Lord in the fires.

ISRAEL'S experience was a veritable passing through the fire. Judgment upon judgment visited the nation because of its heartless defection from the Covenant. But God did not intend His people ultimately to be destroyed. The fire could burn up nothing but that which needed to be consumed. When fully tried Israel should come forth as gold. And meanwhile the burden of the prophet encouraged the people to acquit themselves worthily while still under the fiery ordeal. His exhortation is directed toward assuring them that they are in the fire at God's permission, and toward encouraging them to submit to all that His fire meant, that they might become all that His love intended.

To those who are in the heat of Divine trial, whatever be its second cause, the really important consideration is as to their bearing under the test. What is the fire doing? How deep has its purifying work extended? In what degree are God's purposes being fulfilled? All these are queries of immeasurable moment. Any feeling of resentment, even though it be unexpressed, any maintenance of self-justification, any resistance of spirit against His method of dealing with us, is enough to make His discipline utterly ineffective. Those who accept it with joy make the furnace a very sanctuary of communion with Him, and glorify Him before all beholders. It is easy to sing His praise when the fire is out and deliverance has come. It means infinitely more to Him, and to our own souls also, to do it while the flames are still around us. This is the miracle which convinces all who see it that the Lord of Glory is a reality indeed.

Thy counsels of old are faithfulness and truth.

GOD is always true to Himself. However sore the experiences through which His people must pass they never contradict His nature, nor falsify His Word. Despite the things which the prophet has seen, and the still deeper things which he has heard in his lonely fellowship with Heaven, he holds on to the fact of God's unchangeable faithfulness. Fenced cities may be razed to the ground, fruitful fields may be desolate, prosperity may be destroyed, and fairest hopes may be altogether disappointed. Yet even in these things he sees evidences of the Divine character which endear God to him as the only One Whose truth is adequate refuge and firm foundation for His people. He looks beyond these things that are seen to the things that are not seen; and thus he finds their true interpretation. His is the joy of a heart which has discovered God in many conflicting experiences, and knows Him to be, through all, true to Himself.

There are times in the lives of most of us when we can only understand God's present dealings with us in the light of the past. Only the "counsels of old" can furnish the key to the ups and downs of the present life. Many an one would lose faith entirely did the immediate present stand by itself as the expression of God's care and favour. But even in the darkest day He has not left Himself without witness. When we cannot understand why things should be as they are, we can summon to our aid the history of His faithfulness. And we can sing because it declares that He cannot deny Himself.

ISAIAH xxvi. 3.

Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on Thee: because he trusteth in Thee.

IN nothing is the courage of the Gospel so strikingly expressed as in its promise of peace at the heart of that unspeakable agitation which characterizes the life of the world, and in submitting itself to the test of personal experience. It declares the governing condition upon which God may be known of every man, and encourages all to test its declarations by personal experiment. Isaiah's promise to a harried and disturbed people is one of the surest anticipations of the message of Christ. Unlikely as such a prospect seemed in the present circumstances of the people, he proclaimed God as One to Whom the impossible is as though it did not exist. If His people would but turn from the foreign alliances, upon which they were prone to lean, and would stay them upon God, their troubles should be at an end, and their minds kept in the peace that passeth all understanding.

How is it that, despite all that Christ has promised so few of His followers really enter upon, and live in, the experience of peace? How is it that they are so often worried and anxious and fretful to the point of utter powerlessness; while the world looks on and says—"Where is now their God"? Is it not because we have so largely lost our faith in the power of His Word? True, its promises test our patience; for God's ways are often much slower than our anticipations. But in failing to stay our minds upon His faithful sayings, we forfeit His most precious legacy. For behind the assurance of peace is Christ's assumption of faith—"Ye believe in God, believe also in Me."

I the Lord do keep it; I will water it every moment: lest any hurt it, I will keep it night and day.

FULL of assuring comfort is the promise that Israel shall be tended by the Divine Husbandman, as a vineyard wherein He delights. The figure is by no means new, for both God's purpose and His disappointment already have been expressed in similar terms. Israel had been planted as a vine "in a very fruitful hill," with every circumstance favourable to fruitfulness; but had brought forth nothing but wild grapes. Her hedge had been broken down and her branches trampled in consequence of her faithless backsliding. The eternal Love was not, however, exhausted nor daunted, though temporarily thwarted. God had set Himself to recover His people unto the fulfilment of His first ideals for them; and, in vision, Isaiah sees a fair and fruitful vineyard dressed and protected by Omnipotent care. So he declares what he sees in order to woo the people back to their forsaken faith and forgotten loyalty.

We cannot but contrast Israel, the false vine, with Christ the True. In Him all the Divine purposes are realized; and those who by faith are united to Him, as branches to the parent stem, share His life. It is they alone who experience to the full the keeping power and loving ministry of the Heavenly Husbandman. Moment by moment, night and day, His love flows out toward them in an encircling ministry of care. While they abide in the Vine they cannot but become fruitful, for they are never cast upon their own resources. With God Himself their Keeper, all things within the ambit of His Will are possible to them.

A spirit of judgment to him that sitteth in judgment, and for strength to them that turn the battle to the gate.

IT is part of the heartening message of the prophet that God is entirely sufficient for His people's need. Whatever service He calls upon them to undertake, brings its own gift of adequate strength. Although Israel did not then realize this—or her course would have been differently shaped—the day was not far distant when God should scatter her foes and manifest Himself in her life. Then, all of her peoples, from the judges who administered the law to the humblest soldier in the armies which defended her borders, should realize the appropriate enduement each for his own task. For the grace of God is manifold in its working.

This is more than a promise peculiar to Israel. It is part of the glory of Christ's Gospel. For the enduement of His Spirit, promised to every disciple, is manifested, not in the same way to each, but variously, according as each is appointed to serve by the Will of God. Each has his own individual task to accomplish, for the doing of which nothing less than power from on High is adequate. Whether the duty assigned rates highly in the esteem of men, or whether it is such that a man becomes anonymous in the great host of rank-and-file workers—by whom the largest service of the Kingdom is accomplished—each can only worthily accomplish his obligation by the Spirit's might. How foolish is the man who leans to his own counsel or trusts his own energies!

Woe unto them that seek deep to hide their counsel from the Lord, and their works are in the dark.

THE prophet's indignant outburst against the political intrigues of his day, by which the rulers endeavoured to secure help from other nations in their struggle against hostile invasion, expressed a great moral law applicable far beyond the circumstances of his time. For at all times they who exclude God from their life-plans are doomed to failure and disappointment, and often indeed to entire overthrow. When men are so foolish as to go directly in the face of His Word, the Nemesis of their foolishness never fails to overtake them. If works are planned and carried out in the dark, it is only because they are evil. We see Israel's folly repeated every day and on every hand.

At the back of all attempted secrecy from God is the consciousness of sin. The enlightened mind always has a fairly clear idea as to His disapproval of any intended course. It is, indeed, the condemnation of any course of conduct that it is not brought to the Light in which all things are made manifest. Yet who has not known the utter recklessness which the hope of advantage to be gained from some crooked way induces? It almost seems as though a fatal spell blinds us to a sense of the great realities when we begin to sit loosely to Heaven's clear precepts. On the other hand, if we set ourselves to "walk in the light as He is in the light," the courage of faith always finds the reinforcements of grace. The eternal secrets of peace and good are made known to him who has no secrets from God.

ISAIAH XXX. 21.

Thine ears shall hear a word behind thee, saying, This is the way, walk ye in it.

A THOUSAND temptations to turn aside to the right hand or to the left assail the pilgrim soul. Whether it is a nation or a man who sets out upon the upward path of obedience to the Will of God, the straight way is inevitably a way of conflict. The foe is not always readily recognized as such, for the roaring lion has strange power to become an angel of light at will. Bypath Meadow has proved a more deadly snare than the straight conflict with Apollyon, in countless lives. Yet are we never left without sure guidance. To him who will listen the voice of the Lord is always clear. When his footsteps wellnigh slip, the mercy of the Lord holds up his goings. It is thus that the redeemed in all ages have reached Home.

The voice behind us is most often the voice which tells of God in the past. It is the quickening of memory by His Spirit, to restrain us from false ways and to constrain us to continuance in the more difficult path. No man can light-heartedly turn from the road of duty without denying his own past experience of God. But however specious the temptation may be, and however seductively defection may commend itself, the listening ear can always discern the warning Voice, and the open eye can always see the way of escape—usually leading straight ahead. But every disobedience to the Divine injunction makes the hearing less keen and the seeing less true. We cannot play fast and loose with God's intimations without suffering loss.

So shall the Lord of Hosts come down to fight for Mount Zion.

IT is the prophet's intention to show the futility of any alliance with Egypt, to which Israel turned when danger threatened. This is the burden of his message, that all such alliances are only destructive entanglements, that sooner or later the nation called in to help will succeed in dominating, and that every failure of the national professed trust in God will surely be visited upon His people. Since He has called them His own, and planned their course, the ultimate responsibility for their well-being rests with Him. To trust Him therefore, in obedient co-operation, is to realize His strength exerted for their defence. To fail is to be cut off.

That God allows His people to be tested right up to the last moment is the common experience of all who seek to follow Him. It sometimes seems as though the cause to which they have pledged themselves is on the verge of utter overthrow. More frequently still it seems as though their personal affairs are so beset with threatening difficulty as to leave them no hope of happy emergence. The foe is strong and eager, and his nearness tests faith to the utmost—but only that it may be strengthened. This is God's objective in permitting life's sore embarrassments. And when He gives the word of deliverance faith realizes how good it is to be compelled to wait for Him. For it is never obscure that the very thing that drove us to Him, and shut us out from all other help, was His permissive arrangement.

Blessed are ye that sow beside all waters.

IN the ideal Kingdom, where the presence of the King and His reign of righteousness is a reality to all, there is nothing like mere self-contained blessing. Those who are themselves enriched have an eye that sees and a heart that pities the need of others. They hold their possessions as an entrustment, and are moved by an impulse, to which they unquestionably yield, to share their good with those less favoured. It is thus that the influence of Israel's relationship with God should one day be exerted. Isaiah looked forward to the time when all racial and national prejudices should be overthrown by a passion for the service of God and men. Wherever her sons should go, the confession of their faith would be as the sowing of Heavenly seed whose harvest should not fail.

So it is in the life in which Christ is crowned as King and obeyed as Lord. His Spirit sheds abroad in the heart the love of God ; and it is not as an irksome duty, but with spontaneous gladness, that the life so sanctified goes forth bearing precious seed. Its pathway may lead beside all waters—calm and stormy ; but circumstances have no power to check him who realizes life's great opportunity. Nor can the outcome of his faithful service be measured. It answers to the law of increase beyond computation. It is good for us all to remember that the living seed dropped by the weakest hand is as powerful as that sown in greatest strength.

Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire?

IN picturing God's coming judgment upon the land the prophet sees that a small remnant will be saved. But it will be a very small one. When, as a fire, the judgment of God sweeps through the country, consuming as stubble all that exalts itself against His law, there will be a few who shall pass through its flame unscathed. Upon them the fire shall have no power. But their number shall not be determined by any arbitrary selection. With God there is no favouritism. The only aristocracy in His Kingdom is that of character. Hence Isaiah proceeds to declare the qualifications necessary to endurance in that day, when only that which can endure the fire will abide. The number of the remnant is not yet made up; and any faithful soul may qualify for inclusion by present repentance and practical amendment. This word is not a threat but a Gospel.

Are not the circumstances somewhat analogous to those of our own age? Taught by His Word, we are confidently looking forward to great judgment upon all that uplifts itself against the knowledge of God. We see a world "reserved unto fire." The day of grace fast hastens to its close. The night of judgment will soon close in. Yet this prospect has no terrors for those who have found in Christ their righteousness, and, abiding in Him, have been enabled so to walk as to please God. Their conscience, void of offence toward Him and toward man, is an anticipation of the experience of that day when will be revealed the truth of His assurance, "There is therefore now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus."

For my sword shall be bathed in Heaven.

THUS does God declare the entire righteousness of His universal judgments. Under the most fearful pictures, the dread of that day when His nature shall declare itself in wrath against sin, is declared. But it must not be imagined that there is anything vindictive or unjust in the Divine punishment of sin. The sword which is to execute the righteous sentence upon those who have flouted the holy law and have set God at defiance, is strikingly described as "bathed in Heaven." This is the prophetic way of saying that there shall be nothing unrighteous or unjust in His punitive dealings with men. Nothing shall contradict, but on the contrary everything shall confirm, God's character. Herein is the ultimate security for the deliverance of the righteous, and the ultimate certainty for the destruction of the unrighteous.

So is it always in God's ways with His people. It sometimes seems as though they are smitten in sickness, disappointment, and failure, by the edge of a sword wielded ruthlessly. In reality it is only the sword "bathed in Heaven" which touches them, and that only for their chastening that they may become partakers of His holiness. Every experience of discipline and correction, however sharp and painful, bears indubitable evidence that it is God-directed and hence love-born. And, in their warfare against Heaven's foes, the children of light must in turn themselves bear only this same Heaven-bathed weapon. For none other is mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds.

The redeemed shall walk there.

NOTHING is more beautiful in the whole range of his prophecy than Isaiah's description of the ransomed Jews, delivered from every bondage by the goodness and power of God. Its prospect is directed toward inspiring the people to make themselves morally worthy of their destiny. For while God's grace is unconditioned it ever sets up an imperative. From its first bestowment, those who would know its continuance must give themselves in energetic obedience to its precepts. And here the prophet declares that the recompense of the reward is so glorious as to make every self-discipline more than worth while. God has "prepared for them that love Him such good things as pass man's understanding."

All this is, of course, not merely an anticipation of Israel's experience but of the blessings of Christ's Kingdom. Under Him alone, Who is the true Messiah, are these promises realized. How complete is their fulness—sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, speech to the dumb, and joy to the desolate! And how safe and certain is the Highway from earth to Heaven which He has opened! Nothing of uncleanness, nothing of obscurity, and nothing of victorious evil, is found there. It is a Highway of Holiness wherein the redeemed hold fellowship with their Lord, and journey together as a pilgrim company. What an inspiring picture of the Christian life is this! And how foolish are those who call themselves God's redeemed, and yet prefer to stray in Bypath Meadow, rather than to walk with Him in the way of His commandments!

The king's commandment was, saying, Answer him not.

THE blasphemous challenge of Rabshakeh might well have moved the people to unwise reply. From this, however, the king's commandment, born of his own faith in God, restrained them. For Hezekiah could not believe that God had left His people a prey to their foes. He was content to wait for Him, that he might answer the proud boaster according to his folly. His confidence was altogether unimpaired by the seeming difficulty of the situation, and hence his order to the people to make no answer. Let the enemy construe their silence into an admission of fear if he cared. What matter, so long as God arose in His own good time to vindicate Himself by their deliverance?

Silence is often the strongest rebuke of evil. It was of all weapons in Christ's own armoury the most powerful—as witness His attitude toward Herod. To one unfit to hold converse with purity and truth, the refusal of Christ to say a single word was judgment enough. So too, on occasions, must His people act. There is little to be gained by arguing with evil, since the object of Christian service is not the conversion of its intellectual conceptions but the ultimate destruction of its power. To its blustering threats we must at all times oppose the witness of holy confidence in God. Within ourselves we have experience of Christ's victorious power, which supports the confidence that no enemy of the Truth can ultimately prevail. Let us neither boast nor cringe before Rabshakeh's threats. Let us live unto the Lord; and He will deal with him.

Hezekiah went up unto the House of the Lord, and spread it before the Lord.

HERE is the secret of the king's courage. Conscious of his military inability to oppose the enemy, he has no fear in facing God. It is his strength, in this day of trouble, that there is nothing between him and God which prevents intercourse. The enemy may cut off his lines of communication with earthly allies, but he cannot interfere with his Heavenly alliance. There is always, for such a man, a way out of every such embarrassment as this. It is the upward way. Hezekiah had cultivated the habit of consulting with God about all his affairs, and in this day of crisis it stood him in good stead. For he acted then involuntarily, when a great evil threatened him, as he had always acted in the minor embarrassments of his life. And God rewarded him then as ever.

There is no greater danger to the Christian than that of self-confidence. Too many of us act, when confronted with the necessity of choice or action, without taking any counsel with the Lord. That is why we make so many mistakes whose consequences we are never able to overtake. We judge by the sight of the eyes, forgetting that behind the visible things of life are the invisible, and that while we may deal with the one, only God can effectively deal with the other. If we take time to spread our affairs—which are really His affairs—before Him, we should have less to deplore and more cause for praise than we commonly have now. The great lesson which life seems to be teaching loudly, to all who will learn it, is the necessity of keeping the way into the Secret Place well-trodden.

The Lord was ready to save me.

THUS does Hezekiah sing of his deliverance. He had looked Eternity in the face, and had found there nothing but the love of God. And he had turned again to life to find the same persistent love in everything. He had learned, in advance of his day, what years later was enunciated as one of the cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith—that "whether we live we live unto the Lord, or whether we die we die unto the Lord. Whether therefore we live or die we are the Lord's." The refrain of his song is of the Lord's faithfulness. And it is his inspiration for spending the rest of his years in His glorious service.

Hezekiah's testimony is confirmed, not only in the ampler statements of the New Testament but in the experience of all who have responded to their call and have yielded to their claim. The Lord's readiness to save is written large in the history of every redeemed life, as of the whole Church. It is the secret of every victory over sin and of every attainment in holiness. All who have overcome, and are now in His presence, ascribe their every triumph to Him. And all who are still militant, opposed by every power of the enemy, thus explain to a wondering world their victory and their joy. We proclaim His readiness to save because we know it. Should we not praise Him yet more fully, and declare Him yet more worthily? Is not the Evangel of the modern Church so unconvincing simply because its experience of His saving power is so attenuated?

All that is in mine house have they seen.

EVEN the best of men are prone to the mistake of unguarded impulses. Hezekiah received the messengers of the King of Babylon, and thoughtlessly displayed to them the treasures which had come to him as marks of the Divine favour. Pride in his riches and in the greatness of his resources overmastered both piety and prudence. Little did he think in so doing that he was feeding their avarice, and fanning the flame of Babylon's intention of one day spoiling his kingdom. He failed to give God the glory, and so laid up for himself and his successors a harvest of retribution. For God is jealous and will not give His honour to another. If Hezekiah boasts in an unguarded moment of his wealth, Nemesis will surely overtake him.

When those who have been exalted and enriched by God's grace so far forget the obligation of their sonship as to become friendly with His enemies, disaster is not far away. Had Hezekiah never consented to accept the overtures or to receive the presents of the King of Babylon, he had never been tempted to boast himself before his emissaries. And the Christian who tries to make friendly terms with the world, who meets the world on its own ground, and maintains an unsanctified relationship to its ways, is likewise simply playing into the enemy's hand. Sooner or later he will forfeit the very gifts of God which he regards as his strength. The only way of life is Christ's way—never to compromise with evil in any shape or form. It is narrow but certain and safe.

ISAIAH XL. 31.

They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength.

THE obligations of the new life are sustained by unbroken communion with Heaven. The believer can only fulfil his high calling in power that is not his own. For human resource inevitably fails under the high demands of life. Men, however strong in the natural realm of things, are as children in the hands of a giant within the spiritual sphere where warfare is waged with principalities and powers. But God is sufficient for His people, and none that trust in Him are put to shame. He has called them to a life for which none is sufficient in himself, and it is His responsibility to carry them through. But it is theirs to wait upon Him both for direction and dynamic.

Spiritual enduement is manifested in the most practical way; not as ecstasy but as energy for mounting up into the clear atmosphere of communion with God, for ready obedience in running the way of His commandments, and for steady continuance in walking the Heavenly pathway as His witness before men. This latter is of all duties of Christian faith the most difficult. It is comparatively easy to do the spasmodic thing—whether it be mounting up or running—in an emergency. Necessity is then laid upon us and we cannot resist its compulsion. To walk steadily in a pathway often monotonous and lacking the incentive of any obvious advantage to the high cause of the Kingdom, is infinitely more difficult. It is the commonest lot of us all. Hence the need of pondering well this promise.

I will make the wilderness a pool of water.

THUS is the transforming power of God declared. Places which in the past have been arid and barren are to become fruitful. Instead of drought there are to be floods upon the dry ground. The whole face of nature is to be changed, and in such a way as that only He can be glorified as the doer of it. All this was to be a sign to His people of His indwelling presence. The material blessing which should enrich them would at the same time strengthen their faith. So closely related are temporal and spiritual things when God is in control of a man or a nation.

All this is but a picture of those deeper spiritual processes by which God changes the lives of those who submit to His power. Fruitless and morally unserviceable in themselves, He transforms their every capacity by His mighty Spirit. Lives which have been as a wilderness are irrigated and made beautiful. Hearts hot with passion, and callous with selfishness, are made to beat in harmony with His own; so that from out of them springs of water flow forth to heal and refresh other lives. The God-possessed man becomes a blessing to his fellows and a true representative of his Lord. How great is the need for such to-day! The world around us is dried and parched, and only through individual believers can the living streams reach its thirsty peoples. Herein then lies our daily duty—to be filled with His Spirit and to flow out unceasingly. Earthly channels of Heavenly grace must be open at both ends—Heavenward to receive and earthward to minister.

He shall not fail nor be discouraged.

OF all Isaiah's declarations of the Coming Messiah this is perhaps the most vivid. For He is portrayed as the ideal Servant of God, doing only God's Will, manifesting only God's character, following only God's direction, and upheld only by God's power. Apart from the redeeming grace of His mission—which is the basis of everything—He thus stands out as the pattern of His people's lives in every age. They are saved to serve; but not according to their own uncontrolled inclination. What was indispensable to the Master is altogether necessary also to His disciples. As they partake of His obedience they inevitably reproduce in increasing measure His characteristic qualities. And this is one of them; that although beset by a thousand opposing forces, and having every cause for discouragement, He never lost heart nor allowed Himself to contemplate defeat.

Sometimes it seems to us as though the sheer weight of opposition must triumph over the feeble forces of goodness. In the secret of our own hearts we are painfully aware of the assertions of pride and passion, and are apt to think that holiness is for us an impossible ideal. Round about we see the forces of evil favourably established, so that it often appears as though the things for which Christ's people contend are altogether in danger. Yet when we compare our causes of disheartenment with His we are ashamed of our every fear. For we have infinitely more visible reinforcements of faith than He had; and above all we have the inspiration of His triumph to hearten us. Does it not seem as though the one who yields to discouragement is actually disloyal?

When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee.

THE blessing of redemption by no means exempted God's people from trial. Along with promise of rich prosperity, of fulfilled hopes and answered prayer, the prophet does not fail to warn them of experiences which should test faith to the utmost. When the dark day was upon them, they would need to remember the sun and to believe that it still shone behind the clouds. And when most alone, they would need to recall the unfailing guidance of God and to believe in His persistency. Nor does Isaiah fail to interpret these strange happenings in advance. Their impulse is Divine love, and their objective the strengthening of their hold upon the unseen reality of His presence.

It is good to know that all the mysterious happenings of life are God-planned. Nothing ever reaches us by chance. Even when the flood-gates of sorrow are opened, and the tempest lays waste all that is beautiful, He is at hand—their Author. His purpose of love toward us is unchanged. If we can believe this, we can believe that He will bring us through; and though strained, it may be to the last point of endurance, we can be confident of the ultimate issue. It is this that affords comfort to all those for whom life just now is darkened and overwhelmed. Did they stand alone everything is lost; for nothing robs a man of courage as does a sense of desolateness. But thank God we are not alone. We may be in the waters, but only to pass through them,—and to pass through with God.

ISAIAH xliv. 22.

Return unto Me; for I have redeemed thee.

IN every age this has been God's call to His wandering people. The movement of redemption has always originated with Him,—whether the redemption of Israel from captivity or of the whole world from the bondage of sin. It has always been the unconditioned expression of His own heart, the practical outworking of His own love. And it has ever called for responsive action on the part of those who are potentially benefited by His grace. God always invites His people back to share in a perfect work. Neither their faith, nor their lack of faith, can in any way affect the completeness of what He has done. Even though men are indifferent to the Evangel, the fact of redemption remains eternally unaltered. Thus it is that if they remain outside its benefits the responsibility of their loss is upon themselves.

The condition on which God's redemption becomes a living experience to men is this simple one—"Return unto Me." It involves of course the renunciation of every hindering relationship and pursuit. We have turned every man to his own way, and from that way each must turn again if he is to know all that God has prepared for them that fear Him. On no other terms can the eternal blessing of the Covenant be realized. And our only way of return is by Christ. No man comes to the Father but by Him Who has made the way so plain that wayfaring men, though fools, cannot err therein. Let us not fear to break through our own shame which ever constitutes our greatest difficulty in returning Home.

I will give thee the treasures of darkness.

DARKNESS in the soul is not always the consequence of sin. Sometimes it is ; but even then the treasure of God's pardon is to be found in its depths. The sureness of the Spirit's guidance, leading from the heart of the deepest sin-darkness into the brightest light of forgiveness, is available to all who dwell in the land of the shadow. Indeed, it was in the dark that we all came upon our first glad realization of the unsearchable riches of Christ. But there is other darkness to be encountered on the way Home. The darkness of sorrow and weakness, of unrequited love and unappreciated sacrifice, of loneliness and bereavement, comes into every life. But in all such experience there is hidden treasure which enriches the soul beyond all compare, and which God can only bestow in the dark ; as once, in the darkness that enwrapped Calvary, He gave the greatest treasure of all for the world's salvation.

For He draws near and reveals Himself in gifts appropriate to our need when all is black around us. He teaches us to know the illimitable resources of grace, and puts upon us something of His own beauty, in those hours when all fellowship except that with Himself is impossible. How wonderfully did those hours spent on the mount, in the darkness of night, enrich Christ's earthly life and strengthen Him for the work of redemption ! And it is thus also that His followers are made rich to become His stewards in a world of need. The treasures of darkness are not only endowment but entrustment.

ISAIAH xlvi. 10.

My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure.

THUS does the prophet encourage the people to trust in God for the fulfilment of His promises, by declaring His sovereignty. Because He is unchangeable they may confidently rely upon the realization of every hope which His Word has inspired. And because He is omnipotent every device directed against their well-being must ultimately be frustrated. For what can stand against Him? At the back of His purpose is His measureless might, which protects those who are united to Him in the deliberate intent of obedience. The certainty of their future, thus assured, is the ground of the prophet's exhortation to quiet and uncomplaining confidence in God. Whatever may seem to contest their progress must fall before the strength of His Will.

This is the guarantee of all blessedness to the Lord's people. His Word, pledged to them, is entirely unaffected by every circumstance, even by their own shortcoming and wilfulness. They may lapse into a state of indifference and coldness toward Him —such is the deteriorating power of sin. But the love wherewith they are loved is everlasting. It surpasses even the Divine knowledge of their wayward intent and action; for God is not a man that He should repent. Herein is the strong foundation of our every hope. The future can bring nothing that is able to separate us from His love, or to make void His promises. And, having such hope, our only worthy response is the dedication of ourselves to the doing of His Will. For, like itself, they who do it abide for ever.

Thou art wearied in the multitude of thy counsels.

PART of the prophet's declaration against Babylon, laying bare one of the causes of her impending ruin, this word explains also the weakness of many a believer's life. To hearken first to one exhortation and then to another, to take first this way and then that, is to make disaster certain. The man who has no fixed principle by which the choices and issues of life are decided, is sooner or later bound to come to the place where expedients no longer avail and where the strong facts of life discover his weakness and compass his overthrow. Constant running hither and thither at the word of his multiplied counsellors wearies and drains him of strength. In that condition he falls an easy prey, especially, as is often the case, when his counsellors have led him on to Enchanted Ground, where he is actually in the power of his foe.

The Christian rule of life is simple and unencumbered. Christ is our Counsellor as He is our Saviour, and the chief business of life is to obey His word and to walk in His footsteps. Although His rule is not a system of casuistry, it nevertheless provides for every possible contingency. In every embarrassment and uncertainty there is a plain pathway, which, taken at His direction, leads to light and safety. Other voices may counsel us to take the bypaths of expediency, convention, or easy tolerance; and wearied indeed does he become who gives heed to them. But they whose only Guide is the Lord Himself find increasing rest and strength as they follow Him.

They thirsted not when He led them through the deserts.

ISAIAH foretells the restoration of the exiled people and their return to their own land with gladness. He sees them once again a pilgrim host, marching through the desert which stretched between Babylon and Jerusalem under God's guidance and protection, as their fathers before them had come up from Egypt. None of them lacks anything, for He Who is sufficient for the opening of prison-gates is sufficient also for the supply of all the need of the journey. God must be the leader, as well as the liberator of His people, or they will perish by the way. Can He Who gives the greater gift fail of the lesser? Is it likely that He will bring them forth from captivity only to let them die of thirst?

True as this was in regard to the nation, it is yet truer in regard to God's people, who, at the call of Christ, have come out from the old life of bondage to sin and the world, and confess themselves strangers and pilgrims on the earth. Despite all its beauty, earth is a desert to the soul, providing no satisfaction for its newly-awakened instincts. The new life Divinely imparted must be Divinely sustained. Following in Christ's steps the believer drinks of the brook in the way, as He did before him, and is satisfied. His every longing met, he is thus daily encouraged and strengthened for fresh stages of the journey. It is only when we get away from the straight road along which He leads His people that we miss the living streams; and, endeavouring then to slake our thirst at the world's brackish wells, we but thirst the more.

Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of My hands.

SO constant is the Lord's care of His chosen people that it is as though their names were written on His hand. His every act is directed towards their good. Every movement of His power is concerned with their well-being. Their protection and provision is His avowed responsibility. Their interests are His; for they are part of Himself. It is this that the prophet's figure is intended to convey to their often dull minds. For if they can be assured of the love He bears them they must awaken to its implicates and give themselves to fulfilling them. The objective of this, as of all the prophetic declarations concerning God's Covenant, is the creation of a moral impetus in His sluggard people. For when men really come to know that God cares, they too begin to care. When they realize how closely they are related to Him they begin to walk worthily.

For us this cannot but have a deeper and tenderer meaning than it could possibly have to Israel. For it is interpreted by the print of the nails in the hands of the Redeemer. These are our strong assurances of the constancy of His love. Did we but realize this, how warm and living would be our love to Him. We should count no sacrifice too great, and no service too exacting, if only He is honoured thereby. Let us dwell on this fact, that our names are thus graven on Christ's hands, and our love to Him will become an altogether new thing. And in days of darkness and doubt, when we are entirely afraid to trust ourselves, we may listen to the Saviour's encouraging "Behold My hands," and find life's deepest joy renewed.

He waketh my ear to hear as the learned.

EVERY true prophet must thus be prepared day by day for his ministry. Before any man can declare the message of God it must be disclosed to his own heart and mind. He cannot render his counsels in the form of an evangel to a needy people until he has realized it for himself in the intimacy of communion. He must live in two worlds—of ideals and events—if his testimony is to have any transforming power upon men's lives. Every variation of his secret faithfulness is unerringly reflected in the quality of his public service. Isaiah can only teach the nation the ways of the Lord as he is himself taught of Him. The prophet's open ear is the secret of the nation's opened heart. For when he speaks only what he has first heard in the sanctuary men cannot resist the wisdom and spirit of his message.

Herein is sure direction to all who are in any way privileged to bear God's Word to their fellows. When they speak merely out of their own minds, giving their own interpretation of current events, or hazarding their own thoughts as to future issues, their ultimate influence is but slight. When, however, they respond day by day to the Lord's awakening touch, and listen unhurriedly to catch His message, they stand before others with a certainty which is itself a convicting power. There is no mistaking the man who is a mouthpiece of the Lord. His word comes with an authentication which simply cannot be simulated, and those who hear are arraigned and judged as they hear. Such prophets are the world's greatest need to-day.

Fear ye not the reproach of men, neither be ye afraid of their revilings.

WITH entire frankness the prophet discloses the immediate consequence of faithfulness to God on the part of His people. It inevitably involves them in the reproach of those who see in their conduct a conviction of their own ways. No man undertakes to live in obedience to the law of righteousness who does not immediately find himself in conflict with established custom and conviction. And when he breaks away from these in obedience to an inward impulse of loyalty toward Heaven, he cannot avoid the reviling of those who, for their part, care nothing for the spiritual interpretation of life. In declaring this, however, Isaiah does not fail to assure all such of the favour and fellowship of God Himself. Certain of this, they need not fear what men can say or do unto them. Since He is with them no weapon formed against them can prosper.

All this is an anticipation of the New Testament declaration that "he who will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution." The world treats the followers just as it treated the Master. Indeed, we may accurately estimate our fidelity to Him by the attitude of the world toward us. The early Church, which, with all its faults, lived far closer to Him than does its modern successor, had no doubt as to this. Its history is a long record of reproach and reviling and positive persecution. But its courage shines out as an inspiration to those who today seek to be followers of the Lamb. The perfect love of Him in Whose fellowship its life was lived completely cast out all fear. So, too, shall it be with us, if we do not fall into the modern fashion of following far off.

Be ye clean, that bear the vessels of the Lord.

IN the coming restoration of the people, the sacred vessels of the Temple, carried with them into captivity, shall be taken back for the re-establishment of worship and sacrifice in Jerusalem. This duty devolved upon Priest and Levite, and Isaiah bids them prepare for this sacred service. In the land of their exile the ceremonial observances by which they were fitted for their office had fallen into disuse. Now if they are to be ready when the great day dawns, they must take up their neglected duty and must cleanse themselves to carry out their appointed tasks worthily. In this they are to give a lead to the whole nation, which takes its moral tone from its religious leaders. As they are, so will be those to whom they stand as God's representatives.

What was a ceremonial injunction to those who should carry the vessels of the Lord in Isaiah's day has an actual significance to all who, in the Kingdom of God, are entrusted with His holy service. It is the privilege of every redeemed man to serve as a priest; and in order to fulfil this high calling each must cleanse himself from all filthiness of flesh and spirit. God does not use those whose lives are out of harmony with His laws, whose garments are spotted with the flesh or stained with the dust of the world. It is a holy priesthood to which we are called, and anything which conflicts with that ideal must be drastically dealt with. When it is borne in mind that God is actually seeking to express Himself through our lives, the responsibility of thwarting Him will appear in its enormity.

A root out of a dry ground.

THERE is nothing more striking in this, the most wonderful of all chapters of Messianic prophecy, than the suggestion of unlikeliness which Isaiah here expresses. When Christ comes, it shall not be as a plant which springs from well-watered soil, whose life can be thus accounted for naturally, but as one for whom some supernatural explanation must be sought. This is just the Hebrew way of saying that Christ cannot be explained on human grounds, that He is Himself the greatest miracle of all, and that only the Divine character of the seed can account for such a plant. There is nothing in His surroundings, in the obscurity of His earthly origin, in the lowliness of His early associations, or in the poverty of His racial inheritance to account for His wisdom, His words, or His width of vision. It is not surprising that in the day when prophecy was fulfilled in Himself the men who knew Him best should say—"Whence hath this man such knowledge?" "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?"

Looking at His work in the lives of men to-day, we see Him still "as a root out of a dry ground." For we see purity emerging as it were out of impurity, humility growing in the soil of pride, generosity flourishing from selfishness, and the new life springing up in strength and beauty out of the dry ground of the old. This word is fulfilled afresh in each one who humbly confesses that "Christ liveth in me." And herein is the confidence of those who go forth to sow the Good Seed upon the highway. For Christ takes root in the unlikeliest ground, and in the veriest desert the Rose of Sharon and the Lily of the Valley will blossom.

ISAIAH liv. 2.

Lengthen thy cords, and strengthen thy stakes.

THIS is part of the prophet's passionate declaration that the captivity of his people will come to an end. Despite their present experiences of exile a day of prosperity shall dawn which shall demand a larger dwelling; and he exhorts them therefore to be ready. Its main interest, however, is not merely historical, but in the direction it affords for all Christian living. Expansion is a law of life, whether of the Church or of the individual. But longer cords need stronger stakes. The more weight there is to sustain, and the more strain of wind and tempest to withstand, the deeper must the tent-pegs be driven into the ground. Which is just another way of saying that every development of life demands deepened fellowship with God; always remembering that it is not the stakes which hold the ground, but the reverse.

What most of us need is not so much a wider as a firmer life. As pilgrims we dwell in a moving tent nightly pitched nearer Home. And as life's interests and responsibilities increase our moving dwelling-place must enlarge. But it is folly for any one to grow laterally without laying increasingly firm hold upon the great truths of God's faithfulness in Christ. Of course every man is compelled to go forward if he is to avoid going back. But we must not, if we would avoid the peril of utter failure, lengthen our cords without strengthening our stakes. For in the last analysis our hold upon God, and His hold upon us, is the measure of life's quality and worth. It is fatal to widen life without correspondingly deepening also.

Instead of the thorn shall come up the fir tree.

AGAIN the prophet describes in alluring pictures the return of the people from captivity, and their restoration to their own land. Assured by God's own Covenant, and enriched by His plenteous grace, they shall be as a new people in a new country. For them old things shall pass away and all things become new. Even the face of Nature shall change. Whereas the land in their absence has been overrun with weeds, it shall be tilled and cultivated, so that beauty shall replace desolation and the wilderness shall become as God's garden. Instead of thorn and brier, which from the beginning have been the mark of the sin-curse upon the earth, shall come up the loveliness of fir tree and myrtle tree. And the change shall be altogether attributed to God's power and shall add to His praise.

Surely this is a prophecy of the experience of every redeemed soul, as well as of the blessings of a renewed nation. For this is just what grace does in lives yielded to its influence and obedient to its claims. Whereas thorns and briers of selfishness, passion, and pride have been produced in profusion—a poor return for all the care of the Divine husbandman—grace clears the ground, sterilizes the thorn-seed, and plants there the seed of fruitfulness and beauty. It is the glory of the Gospel that Christ, Who is the Fountain of grace, can change men's dispositions, and can transform the unlikeliest into true sons of God. And they, in turn, go out in His Name to clear the overrun vineyard of the world,—one day to return with joy, bringing their sheaves with them.

ISAIAH lvi. 6.

Also the sons of the stranger, that join themselves to the Lord, to serve Him, and to love the name of the Lord.

IN the coming re-establishment of Israel there should be no exclusiveness. As of old time, the blessings of the Covenant should be available to those who, voluntarily relinquishing their own citizenship, joined themselves to His people. But note what it involved. They must join themselves not only to the Lord's people but to the Lord Himself. They must serve Him because they love His Name. They must keep His Sabbath and obey the terms of His Covenant. This is all to say that spiritual associations are stronger than mere natural affiliations, and that He is the God of all whose hearts are turned toward Him. How the stranger was to come to such knowledge of His law and such love to His Name is not suggested; but the inference is easily drawn. It was by what was seen of His grace, and of the power of His care, in the lives of His own. This is in every age the winsome power that attracts men to their Heavenly Father.

How much more ample are the provisions of the New Covenant than even the widest promises of the Old! It is the Gospel of Christ that the whole world is embraced in the purpose of the Heavenly mercy. It was for the whole world that He died. It is to the whole world that the Evangel is to be proclaimed. And it is out of every nation and kindred and tribe and tongue that the family of the redeemed is finally made up. How great therefore is our responsibility so to present Him to the sons of the stranger that they shall come to join themselves to Him! Is any other of life's concerns worthy to be compared in importance to this duty?

I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit.

GOD has two thrones—in the highest heaven and in the humblest heart. Herein is the confidence of His people, who, certain of their own weakness, are equally certain of power that cannot fail. For if He Who controls the course of all things in Heaven and earth dwells with them, no foe is too strong, no duty too exacting, no service impossible. The past may rise up to challenge and condemn them. Their hearts may often fail them for fear. The distance between their present state and their lofty ideals may seem immeasurable. But if God Himself dwells in them by His Spirit they have an answer to every challenge, a check for every fear, and an enduement for the whole journey. Israel need have no doubt, either in regard to her present or her ultimate destiny, if the prophet declares truly that in spite of everything the living God abides with His people.

All such assurance as thus heartened the nation in her day of need, is doubly covenanted to us in Christ. This is just the meaning of what we call the Incarnation. He Who dwelt in Heaven came to dwell also among men, and so doing declared that fallen human nature is still capable of receiving the Divine life, of becoming a medium of Divine glory. And the miracle of His first coming is repeated whenever a humble and contrite heart opens its door to admit Him as Saviour and Lord. But to the individual He comes, not for a few short years as He came to earth, but to abide for ever. And it is His own presence, and not any effort of theirs, which makes the hearts of His children a worthy dwelling-place.

ISAIAH lviii. 11.

The Lord shall guide thee continually.

THERE are conditions attached to this promise of continual guidance which it is well that we should regard. It is the man who takes away the yoke, the putting forth of the finger, and the speaking of vanity from his life, and who, at the same time, draws out his soul to the hungry and gives himself to the relief of the afflicted, who realizes light in the darkest day. In other words, it is the one who maintains correspondence with God. For all that is set forth here is but an approximation to His character. When a man is doing His Will from the heart, and following the dictates of His law as closely as may be, then God covenants to direct his goings and to save his footsteps from slipping. It is always obedience to the light of yesterday which makes certain the guidance of to-day. We cannot live the Divine life by fits and starts. Nor are there any optional sections in the Heavenly law.

How important it is that we should seek to be guided continually! There are days when it seems so easy to take our own way, to live without prayer, and to order our goings without any reference to God's requirements. Past experience seems to afford sufficient light, and the very ordinariness of our surroundings induces a sense of security and sufficiency. Whereas it is in just such circumstances that we need to seek the Lord's leadership. For who can measure the issue of our commonplace hours? And who can know the possibilities which we fail to realize when we walk alone?

But your iniquities have separated between you and your God.

HUMAN sin always beclouds Divine glory. The declaration that "the Lord's hand is not shortened that it cannot save; neither His ear heavy that it cannot hear" at once arouses the hope of a great revival. For if He is the same as of old, who can withstand His power? But He cannot be so known among men while His own people are out of touch with Him. They are the channel of His grace to men. It is through them that His power is exerted; and if they have somehow dissolved their partnership with Him His purposes are thwarted. Sin is never a light thing under any circumstances. And when it is seen, as here, to hinder the putting forth of His might to verify His claim, it is of all things exceeding sinful.

If we always realized that the Lord depends upon His people to be His co-workers we should order our lives with strict carefulness, we should keep ceaseless watch over the uprisings of our own self-will, and we should give ourselves with unremitting earnestness to the doing of everything we know to be His Will. Nothing has such sanctifying influence on life as a sense of high responsibility. No man can tolerate his own sin when it is brought home to him, not as an offence only but as an embarrassment to God. May we not well ask ourselves if we, regarding iniquity in our hearts, are hindering His work in our midst? Is it not possible that some of us, who bear His Name, are in some degree the cause of the deadness and indifference which is all around us?

ISAIAH lx. 20.

The days of thy mourning shall be ended.

FROM glory to glory does the prophet carry the people in his vision of the golden future to which God will surely bring them. Darkness shall for ever be dispelled by unfading light. Riches shall increase beyond all thought. The nations shall bring tribute to the city in which God dwells, and in which His people shall be glorified by His presence. Former woes shall all be forgotten in the joy of the new life. The tears of exile-days shall all be wiped away. Rejoicing hearts shall live in perpetual noon-day. It is with such a prospect that he seeks to allure Israel from the folly of their indifference back to the worship and service of the God of love.

All this has a present meaning for us. For the glory of God has been fully manifested in the face of Jesus Christ, and to those who company with Him the promises to Israel are fulfilled in a sense in which Israel never knew them. Even now the joy which fills their heart, as they spend life in His service, far outweighs all the sorrow and mourning which they ever knew. They cannot longer mourn the sin which He has forgiven and forgotten. They cannot mourn the burden of pain which they know to be the discipline of His love. And they cannot mourn those who leave them for the House of Many Mansions, since He promises a glad reunion. And all this is only an anticipation of the exceeding and eternal weight of glory which one day shall for ever blot out the memory of earth's darkness.

They shall build the old wastes.

ON Israel's return to their own land after long years of exile which, though they had sapped strength, had not destroyed national aspiration, the prophet foresaw the restoration of all that had fallen into decay in their long absence. For both the feet of the invader and the hand of time had combined to lay the land waste. A great task would challenge in consequence the faith and devotion of the restored nation. Yet the prophet has no doubt but that they would rise to the task and carry it out in the spirit of men who realize that God is with them. This picture of a people exulting in the goodness of the Lord is drawn to encourage them, as only the certainty of victory and success can encourage men.

All this is a parable of the Christian life; for the blessings promised to Israel have their fulfilment only through Christ in those who are of the true Israel by their union with Him. Redeemed from the hand of the enemy, the Christian sets about rebuilding the waste places in his own life, and then in the world around him. For in every life sin has made its ravages and worldliness its breaches. Powers and capacities have been laid waste by misuse and disuse and must be reclaimed by the energy of faith working under direction of the Word of God. And all around us, too, are evidences of the enemy's destructive power in a world which is rightly God's. It is toward bringing it back to His feet and under His rule that all true Christian service is directed. This then is our daily duty and privilege, for which the power of His Spirit is both available and sufficient.

They shall call them, The holy people, The redeemed of the Lord.

THE future glory of Israel is to be so clearly identified with God's power that she shall be an indubitable witness to all other peoples. So great is to be the change in her state that no other explanation will be adequate. The contrast between bondage and freedom, between oppression by foes and victory over them, between a wilderness overrun with weeds and a garden fertile and fruitful, between broken altars and living worship, shall in that day be so vivid as to bring a positive awe upon all beholders and to evoke questionings to which there is but one answer. His people shall shine with attractive brightness which is not their own, but the reflected grace of Heaven.

And in all ages it is the same. God is known by what is seen of Him in the lives of His people. They either authenticate or discredit Him. His power is either declared or denied by the character of their lives. Faith in Him is either made easy or impossible as its effects are noted in those who make profession of belief. The responsibility, therefore, of living the highest possible type of Christian life rests upon all who name His name. For it is upon Him that reproach falls when their lives are discrepant. Possibly it should not be that men take their measure of God from other men. But it is so. How urgent, then, is the duty of so living to-day, by the resources of His grace, that beholders shall say of us, "The holy people: The redeemed of the Lord," and shall bow in worship before Him!

In all their affliction He was afflicted, and the angel of His presence saved them.

THUS does the prophet interpret the wandering ways of Israel, and the suffering by which the nation was corrected and refined. God had never willingly afflicted them. As the father suffers both in the wrongdoing of the child and in the necessity of his punishment, so He had been the greatest sufferer in Israel's affliction. He had, by no means, been far off from them as a judge in the remote heavens, but had in all the days been near, sharing the experiences He directed and entering into all the retribution He permitted. Even in the darkest days of captivity He had not forsaken them. And it was entirely because the unseen angel of His presence guarded them from the beginning that they had been saved from utter destruction.

How near does all this bring God to our hearts! What may have been hard for Israel to realize is infinitely easier for us to discern, since Christ has taken our nature and shared our life. "In all points tempted like as we are," and learning "obedience by the things that He suffered," He comes close to our sorest griefs, and gives interpretation to our most mysterious testings. The close connexion between His people's affliction and the angel of His presence, is a rich encouragement to faith and an undying inspiration to love. For it declares that He not only entirely understands the thing that is utterly beyond our understanding, but that He is close at hand to succour us under its strain and to save us from the peril which lurks in every strange experience. His is the friendship which outlasts every demand made upon it.

There is none that calleth upon Thy Name, that stirreth up himself to take hold of Thee.

TURNING from the ideal to the actual, from the glorious future to the inglorious present, the prophet voices the aspiration of every true soul in the nation. For hearts are stirred to intense desire by contemplation of what God will one day do for His people, and eager hope cries out, "Why not to-day?" Since with God all things are possible, why should He not rend the heavens and level the mountains to come to the deliverance of His own? But the cry is answered as soon as it is uttered; for the prophet sees well that the nation is yet far from ready for His appearing. The work of discipline must still go on until God and not His gifts, His presence and not the prosperity it brings, becomes the nation's deepest desire. For as yet there is no real prayer to Him, nor any willing disturbance of personal inconvenience in order to lay hold upon His purpose. And until faith becomes vehement it is not a vital factor in the situation.

It is always necessary for men to stir themselves up to pray. Sluggishness of spirit and coldness of desire are only too well known, for we are all apt to become disinclined to make prayer a real transaction. Who does not need to lay well to heart the fact that when prayer is most difficult it is most necessary, and that when we feel least like breaking away from our ordinary absorptions in order to seek the Lord, we most need to do so? Languid prayer which costs nothing is not of the sort which takes the Kingdom of Heaven by force. Let us resist as the deadliest peril of life anything like yielding to mere moods in our vital commerce with God.

Before they call, I will answer; and while they are yet speaking, I will hear.

THE significance of this word is by no means exhausted by its first reference to Israel. It states for all time the intention of God in regard to His people, declaring that His care for them is not contingent upon the timeliness of their prayer. Whatever be the nature of their faith, whether constant or fitful, whether voiced in intercession or silent in indifference or despair, His ear is always toward them. He knows their needs far better than they do, and long before they express them. When they pray it is not to One whose reluctance must be overcome but whose generous purpose is already determined. Faith's prayers never find Heaven unprepared, nor do they take God by surprise.

What an encouragement is here to continue instant in prayer for our own needs, for the whole Church, and for the work of the Kingdom in the world! For not only is God ready to do the thing we ask, but He has sent His Spirit into our hearts to inspire our intercession, and to direct our requests according to His Will. Prayer to which He prompts us is answered as it is made. Such praying has no qualifying "if" attached. Did we but realize it, how entirely should we yield ourselves to the control of the indwelling Spirit, Who is ever urging the obedient soul to lay hold upon the Promises. Nothing is stranger than our reluctance to pray, when we recollect that the mountain-peak experiences of life have all been in this realm of the Divine response to unspoken request.

To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at My word.

THUS is the man described to whom God will commit the interests of His Kingdom. All that has been promised to Israel shall not be brought about by any of earth's great ones. No strong warrior nor worldly-wise leader shall secure the peace and prosperity which have been foretold. God shall choose His own instruments, and they shall be such as the world would never recognize. For Heaven's measure of greatness differs entirely from earth's standards. With God the truly great man is he who knows his own littleness, who bows in reverent self-surrender before His majesty, and who regards the Divine Word as the unquestioned law of his life. In One only did these ideal qualifications appear unmixed with any less worthy traits. Through Him alone does the Kingdom of God come to Israel, and to the whole world.

The sum total of the entire Christian ethic is to follow Christ. If we would do His work, we must walk in His steps. Our character must increasingly approximate to His own. In all life's relationships —selfward, worldward, and Godward, we must seek to maintain His attitude and spirit. For only so do we become instruments of righteousness, vessels meet for His use. And all this is made possible, not by any human effort but by the free flow of His Spirit. United to Him His people share His life, and hence are partakers of His Kingdom and glory. Let us beware lest, like Israel, we forfeit such a privilege.

Then said I, Ah, Lord God! behold I cannot speak.

WHEN the Word of the Lord came to Jeremiah, it found him utterly without illusions as to his own capabilities. Realizing something of the greatness of the task to which he was summoned, knowing full well the difficulties which confronted any man who sought to recall a rebellious people to their first duty, and aware of the inevitable consequences of faithfulness toward Heaven, he shrank instinctively from the Divine commission. He knew in himself his utter insufficiency, both of training and of natural quality. His answer to God is not the voice of unfaithfulness or unwillingness, but simply of self-consciousness. He is entirely honest in his self-deprecation ; and hence God corrects his determination by correcting his vision. He gives him a new insight into his own history, declaring his life to have been His care from the beginning, and all his experience a direct qualification for the service to which he is now called. Further, He assures him of the ultimate issue of his obedience, and covenants the constancy of His presence. Yet further He puts forth His hand to touch his mouth. Jeremiah has confessed the weakness of his own speech, and it is just in the place of weakness that He interposes His strength. With such an enduement all fear may well vanish.

Does not Jeremiah's preparation for service cast light upon our own ? Like him we are conscious of inability to carry out the Lord's commands, and like him we confess that human speech is all too feeble to convey His message to men. But like him we too may have the Lord's touch of power and become His mouthpiece, if we desire above all things in life to serve the cause of His glory.

The priests said not, Where is the Lord?

IT is part of the deteriorated state of the nation that it has lost sensitiveness in regard to its own moral condition. Although the evidences of God's favour have been largely withdrawn, there has been no inquiry, neither upon the part of the people nor their leaders, as to the reason for this evident loss. They not only acquiesce in the situation, but actually strengthen themselves in the very things which have caused the light of God's countenance to be turned from them. Such indifference is the direct outcome of their evil indulgences. Disinclination for the searching experiences of spiritual restoration is a symptom of moral decline. And it is the recoil of unfaithfulness toward Heaven that men and nations alike should be satisfied with their state, and become supine in regard to the things they have forfeited.

Nothing is more important for maintaining true relationship with God than utter fidelity with ourselves. When we become conscious that all is not well, that love is waxing cold, that prayer is losing its delight, that the Word no longer charms, and that zeal is unaccountably flagging, our only safety lies in dealing ruthlessly with our own souls, and in submitting life to the scrutiny of the Spirit. For these things simply proclaim the fact that He has been grieved; and not until the offending thing is put away will He return to the children of His love. Nor need we be in any uncertainty as to the thing in question. The honest heart is never left in doubt concerning God's requirements for fellowship.

Yet return again to Me, saith the Lord.

THE sin of Israel is as the sin of an unfaithful wife. God has blessed her with all the riches of His love, and espoused her unto Himself. Despite the tenderness of His care, however, she has deserted Him for idols, and has played the harlot with worldly lovers. Yet such is His love, that, if she will but return to Him, the past shall be forgiven, its evil outcome shall be dealt with, and a richer future than she has ever known shall dawn for her. This is the note of yearning affection upon which the prophet's entire message is pitched. But it is the subtle strength of sin that such an one should have little or no desire to respond to the overtures of His mercy.

It is often a sense of shame which hinders our return to Him after wilful wandering. The best that is in us rises up to condemn our sin, and we do not dare to approach Him on the old terms of reverent familiarity. And yet it is just this we must do if we are to be assured afresh that the union is not finally broken and that life's possibilities are not entirely forfeited. It is well that we should feel shame, for that very feeling testifies to His unbroken hold upon us, and is indeed part of our confidence in the welcome which awaits us. For the Divine love is entirely greater than our inexcusable wandering, and altogether higher than our justified fears. How foolish is the man who holds off from God, from whatever cause, since He has exhausted language in disclosing His heart!

And when thou art spoiled, what wilt thou do?

IT is all very well for the nation to deceive herself by putting on festive raiment and adornment, but the day is surely coming when every flimsy disguise shall be torn away. Clothing and ornament, however gorgeous, will be no defence against the wrath which shall break out against her sin; and it is to save her from the irreparable disaster of discovering her fault when no time is left for making amends, that Jeremiah thus challenges her. It is unspeakable folly to live as though the present were all there is of life. As surely as night follows day, so surely does retribution follow defection from God. The sun of prosperity may shine for a while; but when it sets darkness reigns. If the nation can be brought to realize this while yet there is time, moral amendment will at once be begun. But the prophet's words fall on ears dulled to finer voices by the babel of earth's sounds, and the nation goes on heedless of the day that is coming.

It is in ordinary hours that men unconsciously prepare for life's great crises. Sooner or later there come to each of us experiences which shatter self-confidence and lay our prosperities in the dust. For God loves us too well to leave us to the peril of an undisturbed life. And all such times of testings are only merciful anticipations of the greater to come. To abide in Christ always is to make certain that whenever the tempest breaks our house shall not fall. The Rock on which it is built stands firm in that day as in this.

I will make my words in thy mouth fire, and this people wood, and it shall devour them.

BEHIND the word of the prophet is the power of God. The message he speaks will be confirmed both to those who accept and to those who reject it. Because it is God's Word none shall ultimately be able to withstand its power. Upon those who bow beneath its demands and yield them to its claims it shall be as cleansing fire. Upon those who spurn it and are indifferent to its declarations it shall return in judgment. How serious, then, are the issues of its proclamation in those who hear! And how awesome is the position of the man who, speaking the message of God, liberates power which he can neither measure nor control. For prophet and people alike, this message, given in the first instance to hearten Jeremiah for his difficult task, is full of solemn warning.

It is ever God's way to encourage His servants by assurances of His presence. Sent out to declare His Will in a world which is avowedly contemptuous of Him, they must incur opposition before which the stoutest heart may well quail. But the very message committed to them brings them confidence. They see it working effectually in them that believe. Thus their belief in its power is confirmed as they proclaim it, and thus also their courage is maintained. Let us therefore not be afraid of speaking it faithfully, and always in love. In the lips of the weakest it is the power of God. We do not need to reinforce its strength by any false fire of human passion. For He Himself resides in His truth.

I will bring evil upon this people, even the fruit of their thoughts.

THIS, the most terrible description of the wages of sin which Jeremiah is able to declare, exposes as with a swift stroke the root cause of Israel's backsliding. It is their thoughts, their conceptions and ideals, that are at fault. Behind their outward perversity is an inward alienation from the standards of God's law, and a spiritual revolt against the demands of His rule. They have shaped their course so as to secure what they have come to regard as the good things of life; but the prophet warns them that they have by no means reaped the full harvest yet. For the thoughts which govern their actions determine also their destiny. "As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he"—for ever.

Thoughts form at once the largest part of life, and the most difficult to order. They are the most fruitful of all avenues of temptation, and exert transforming power either for good or evil. Many a man has found his sorest bondage in their tyranny and despotism. And many a man has followed his unregulated conceptions of good, as a traveller follows the will-o'-the-wisp, only to find himself disillusioned and lost in a land which holds no place of repentance. How full of hopeful promise to all such is the Gospel, which assures us that if the unrighteous man will forsake his thoughts pardon awaits him, and that if the enslaved life is entirely yielded to Divine control every thought shall be brought into captivity to the obedience of Christ! The fruit of such Heaven-ordered thought is the promise of eternal life in its fulness.

Will ye steal, murder . . . and come and stand before Me in this house?

ISRAEL had evidently lost all sense of the moral fitness of things. Despite their open disregard of God's law, and their notorious indulgence in flagrant evil, the people nevertheless kept up a pretence of worship. They presumed upon His mercy, and offered their impious sacrifices, imagining that observance of the externals of religion could meet the demands of His righteousness. Moreover they persuaded themselves that the protection of the Covenant made their actual conduct a matter of indifference. Having known something of the freedom of His pardon, and the length to which His long-suffering goes, they actually presumed upon His favour toward them as though it conveyed a license to sin. Hence this indignant outburst on the part of the prophet, who sees in such conduct defiant hypocrisy toward God.

By no means is sin of this sort confined to the Israel of Jeremiah's day,—as witness the New Testament warning against the contradiction of sinning that grace may abound. Which warning is needed to-day as ever. For Christ has delivered men from sin's penalty that they may cease from its practice. His mercy, rightly conceived, is a moral imperative to follow after holiness in all upon whom it is bestowed. Any one who thinks that by the observance of conventional form or the energy of zealous service he can compound for self-indulgence and sin, has altogether misconceived the message of the Gospel. If we would be Christians at all—in the true sense of the term—we must cultivate absolute honesty of soul.

They have healed the hurt of the daughter of my people slightly, saying, Peace, peace; when there is no peace.

THE falseness of their religious leaders contributed not a little to the degenerate state of the people. While their rulers entered into foreign alliances contrary to Divine prohibition, and entangled the nation in influences altogether too strong for resistance, the prophets, whose business it was to recall them constantly to God and to His Word, failed of their mission. Unwilling to risk an unpopular verdict they compromised with truth, passing over the obvious fact of sin against God, and of the necessity of repentance and confession, and gave false assurances of peace which only emboldened men to continue in courses opposed to the Divine commandment. As the influence of their unfaithfulness was beyond measure, so also, Jeremiah declares, is the fearfulness of their retribution. For the judgment of God upon those who, by their own unreality, cause others to wander from the pathway of obedience is never uncertain.

If the privilege of leadership is great so also is its peril. The man who presumes to speak in the Name of God, whether to a small or large circle, takes upon him a responsibility which only the utmost fidelity can discharge. He must be faithful to God by being faithful with men. Sin must not lose its horror for him, nor dare he excuse it in any, least of all in himself. True, he must proclaim the mercy which is wider than the wideness of the sea, but only in such a way as to inspire men to abiding penitence. Nor dare he declare the Divine forgiveness on easier terms than those laid down—sincere confession and utter abandonment of sin. For only so are souls healed. Grace never works superficially.

Let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth Me.

IN the coming judgment, which is the subject of the prophet's message, every human resource will be inadequate and every human refuge shall be swept away. The wisdom of the wise man, the strength of the mighty, and the possessions of the rich, must all prove insufficient to stave off disaster which is the fruit of sin. Only those whose faith in God has held to His way despite every adverse influence will be delivered from the storm. No other confidence is of any value; and Jeremiah therefore urges the people to discriminate between the true and the false while yet there is time for repairing wrong choices by turning to the Lord. For when the evil falls there will be no opportunity to retrace their steps and to establish themselves in His favour.

How different from the Divine standards of worth are those commonly accepted amongst us! Wisdom, strength, and riches are the desire and envy of most men. It is after these things that the world seeks, spending every real treasure in the search. Yet such value as these have is strictly measured, and is altogether bounded by the present. Hence it is not those who fail in this quest but those who succeed, who lay up for themselves undying disappointment. For the only abiding satisfaction is that knowledge of God which is life eternal. For the future will only more fully disclose all its riches and blessedness. And this satisfaction is available to each of us in Christ. Fellowship with Him is life's true glory.

It is not in man that walketh to direct his steps.

UPON the course of his message to the people Jeremiah breaks in with a soliloquy of his own. From speaking of God he turns to speak to Him. His heart is burdened and his spirit is oppressed by the message he has to declare; and to strengthen his confidence and renew his courage he turns from the outward to renew his fellowship with Heaven, and to get as it were a fresh grip of God's hand. Confronted with a task whose issues were overwhelming, he pours out his confession of weakness and his consciousness of personal unworthiness, knowing how fully he is understood by the Lord he serves, and how adequate to his needs are the certainties of His love and power. He cannot plan his own pathway nor order his service by any light of experience or precedent. He must be in the hand of the Lord if His purposes are to be fulfilled through him.

This is a lesson for all time. Only when those who seek to be God's servants are content to submit the entire ordering of life to Him, and to follow the guidance of His Word and Spirit, are they safe from mistakes which have far-reaching consequences for themselves and others. For life in its largest meanings is altogether too great for human wisdom and foresight. Nor does God intend that any should be equal to it apart from the reinforcements of His grace. It is, however, part of the Evangel that sure leadership is covenanted to all who are willing to renounce themselves and to walk by faith. And these, like Jeremiah, are used of God. It is not to confident strength but to surrendered weakness that He commits the interests of His Kingdom. Thus none are excluded from the high honour of service.

Therefore pray not thou for this people.

THIS is the most striking of all the Divine commands laid upon Jeremiah. It tells of God's displeasure far more emphatically than do all the declarations of future punishment with which the nation is to be visited. The fact that God will not hearken to prayer on their behalf is eloquent of the nature of their sin. It has separated them from long-suffering love. It has cut communication with Heaven. For it has violated every reasonable condition on which men can hold converse with Him Who is their true good. Israel knew full well what God required, and her multiplied idolatries only expressed the national determination to have none of Him. When men or nations deal so with light from Heaven, judicial blindness falls upon them. Though their eyes may open under the shock of some great calamity, their efforts then to re-establish relationship with an offended God are all in vain. Those who deny Him, of persistent purpose, are themselves denied.

Men of quickened instinct dread nothing more than the silence of God. An earlier seer than Jeremiah said that if God were silent to him he must become like those that go down to the pit. And in this he expresses the fear of all who have been brought into His fellowship. Yet such is the seductive power of sin that we do not hesitate to play fast and loose with His law, all the time expecting that He will come at our call in the hour of danger. Let us not deceive ourselves, for God is not mocked. Whatsoever a man sows in this respect he must also reap.

How canst thou contend with horses? . . . how wilt thou do in the swelling of Jordan?

THIS is God's answer to His disheartened servant. Jeremiah is frankly perplexed at the seeming inequality of God's ways. He is unable to understand why iniquity should appear to bring prosperity while righteousness involves adverse fortunes. With the perfect confidence of one who knows His God he does not hesitate to bring his difficulty to Him; and God answers by telling that there are yet harder things ahead for faith to overcome. The trials of former days have been but as contending footmen. Those to come will be like horsemen. Hitherto he has lived in a land of summer peace. But he must yet face storms and floods before his course ends. Thus does God brace His servant by a frank disclosure of the need of high courage and strenuous purpose.

Every man can learn from his own past what is the quality of his faith, and what the strength of his hold upon the things of God. For every man has been tested by trial, disappointment, and moral perplexity. The effect of these things upon his own heart and life is a prophecy of his preparedness to meet the greater tests which are in front of us all. For if men have become wearied in faith or uncertain in aim by reason of lesser evils, it is folly to imagine that great calamities will discover in them greater powers of resistance. If in the green pastures of peace it has been impossible to maintain the strenuousness of true consecration, how necessary is a great renewal of Divine grace in view of the stormy crossing of Jordan! He who realizes this will betake him to Christ without delay.

If ye will not hear it, my soul shall weep in secret places for your pride.

HOW tender is the heart of the prophet toward those whose impending doom he must declare! It is in no harsh sense that he declaims against the evils which are driving the nation toward the certain consequence of a broken Covenant. His fellowship with God has given him something of His nature. The strong grip of everlasting love is upon his own heart, and he has come to look upon his fellows in the light of its influence. He yearns over them with the passion of a true shepherd of souls. It is pain to him to think of men indifferent alike to the call of God and their own good. And in this he reveals his own heart quite unconsciously, and without any intent of attracting men to himself. This is the spontaneous outflow of one who loves souls because he loves God.

It is safe to say that lack of love in service for the Lord, and especially in necessary denunciation of sin, accounts for a large part of our failure to win men to His Kingdom. Too often Christ is misrepresented by the hardness and harshness with which His Word is proclaimed. For it is impossible to think of Him as foretelling the wrath of God upon sin except in a voice almost broken with sobs. And it is certain that as we catch His Spirit in this respect, and really manifest eternal love shed abroad in our hearts by His Spirit, men will be convinced of the truth of His Word. For this we must, day in and day out, company with Him.

Therefore we will wait upon Thee, for Thou hast made all these things.

PART of the prophet's vision of the consequence of Israel's sin against God is of widespread famine, with all the misery which dearth ever brings in its train. His picture of a land desolate and forsaken, and of a people smitten and cast out, vividly portrays the evil which can only be averted by national repentance. And as he muses upon it his sensitive soul breaks out into prayer, for he sees the reproach which such a state of things must inevitably bring upon the Lord's name. He fears that before the eyes of the other nations, to whom Israel stands in some sense as God's representative people, the throne of His glory must be disgraced. And he affirms his own purpose of waiting upon God, Who alone can so turn the heart of the nation to Himself as to avert its threatened doom.

Waiting upon God is no mere nerveless meditation. It is the surrender of every vital energy to His Will. While it is the confession of utter weakness and inability, it is the expression of the soul's confidence. And, reliant upon the Promises that cannot fail, they who wait upon Him go forth to readjust their own lives, and to repair the waste places round about them. They recognize that He is Sovereign, and that they are His servants whose responsibility is to carry out His instructions. In their ranks are the weak, the poor, and the world-despised. Yet it is through such that kingdoms are brought to nought and His empire established.

If thou take forth the precious from the vile, thou shalt be as my Mouth.

GOD is always willing to restore to the joy of fellowship and to the dignity of service those who turn to Him in true penitence. Originally intended to be His messenger to the other nations, Israel forfeited this high honour by her unfaithfulness. Mingling for reasons of material advantage with those from whom she should have been separated for purposes of spiritual influence, she had herself become defiled with their idolatries. In consequence she is no longer the Lord's messenger, but rather discredits His Name. Instead of leading other peoples in paths of righteousness she has become a byword, and can only recover herself by resolute amendment. The casting out of all the idolatrous influence in the land, and the separation of herself unto the service of God, will alone effect her restoration. The cost is great; but how much greater the prospect which this promise opens up.

Power to speak the message of God is always conditioned by purity of motive and life. He does not shed His light on the world through lives that are opaque, but through those who are transparent. He does not speak the Evangel through unclean lips. But He does condescend to use lives in which there is sincere separation from all that is known to be contrary to His Will. How great is the honour of being as His mouth, and how unspeakable the ungracious folly which forfeits this for any deceptive advantage of vileness.

For Mine eyes are upon all their ways.

BOTH the punishment and the recovery of His people is covenanted by the Lord's care. "He is faithful and just" both to reward their iniquity and in due time to crown their penitence. They shall not escape the consequence of their defection from Him, for none of their ways are hidden from His sight. None can sin with impunity, even though, for the time being, they may seem to prosper. The law of retribution may be slow in its working, but it is as sure as is God's own nature. When, however, the people shall turn to Him in the land of their exile, they shall prove that the law of forgiveness is likewise as firm as His Throne.

The knowledge that God's eye is upon the ways of His people is at once a restraining and a constraining force. They fear Him, not for His omnipotence but because of His love. They cannot persist in sinful courses which contradict His Will, when they realize the watchfulness of His care for them and the grief of His heart over those who wilfully wander from His ways. When the sharp stroke of discipline falls upon them, they know its justice, and interpret it as His faithfulness, and are thus saved from resentment. Further, the knowledge that every secret thing is naked and open to Him, and that He puts the right value upon motive and endeavour, becomes an increasing imperative for the doing of His Will. Others may have no appreciation of the sacrifice by which loyalty is maintained; but He entirely understands. And, because He knows and cares, nothing can interfere with the course of His love toward His own.

Blessed is the man that trusteth in the Lord.

IT is as though the prophet divides the nation into those who trust in man and those who trust in God. Upon the former the curse of disappointed hope and overthrown enterprise shall surely come. The springs of their confidence shall dry up, and all in which they place reliance shall prove deceptive. This is true, alike of individuals in their personal concerns and of the nation in its world policies. On the other hand, those who trust in the Lord, and whose lives express in practical action the faith of their hearts, are assured of blessing by reason of His faithfulness. For He is "God over all, blessed for ever," and has pledged Himself to the defence of those who confide in Him, to the supply of their every need, to their safe guidance, and to their ultimate reward. And His character is ever the ground of His people's confidence.

Jeremiah's discrimination clearly anticipates Christ's disclosure of life's contrasted foundations. Those whose confidence is in men, whether themselves or others, are building upon sand. Sooner or later their error will be discovered, when no time is left for its repair. The curse of the man who thus chooses to base his hopes otherwhere than in God is simply the outworking of the law of cause and effect. That which cannot stand the inevitable test both of present and future must fall. But those who build upon the assurances of God's truth build upon solid rock. Nothing can overturn their hopes; for nothing can change His nature. And what blessedness it is for the weakest of His people to know that there is a place for them in the covenant of His mercy, and in the purposes of His everlasting wisdom.

The vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter: so he made it again.

ORIGINALLY given to Jeremiah to hearten him in respect of his mission to the nation, the parable of the potter's wheel is a picture of life. Israel, so highly favoured, had failed to respond to the care and discipline of God. She had thwarted His purpose, and proved herself unworthy of His confidence. But just as the potter did not cast aside the clay which crumbled under his touch, but remodelled it into a vessel of other shape and use, so is God dealing with the nation. It can never be what He originally intended. The marred vessel cannot be used as He had designed to use it—but it can be re-made. Almighty love and power is not finally contradicted by human unfaithfulness; and so He will re-cast Israel in the furnace of affliction and in the humiliation of exile, until once again she becomes a vessel meet for His use. And this He is doing still.

So too He deals with individual life marred by sin. It is the glory of the Gospel that men who have failed to recognize their high calling, and to respond arightly to His claims, can be re-made. For they are still in the hands of the Potter, and His power is equal to dealing with all self's destructiveness. The whirling wheel of changing circumstances is directed by His oversight, while the things which press upon heart and conscience are His instruments for creating conviction and penitence, and so for turning rebellious wills to Him. It is in Christ that He has declared thus the purpose of our every experience, and the certain prospect of the life yielded to His grace.

Whither the Lord had sent him to prophesy.

THE amazing courage of the prophet declares his confidence in God. Commanded to do a hard thing, and to speak strange words to the people, with the full knowledge that his action may be misunderstood, and may bring upon him opposition and violence, he nevertheless does not hesitate. God has spoken to his heart, and he has trained himself to obey His voice at all cost. For what is the enmity of man in comparison with the favour of God? He can well withstand the one if he does not forfeit the other. And he is strong in the confidence that with him, for his protection and defence, is all the power of Heaven. Against a man charged with the Divine message no weapon can ultimately prosper.

Nothing is more needed in our day than a race of men who are unafraid of the risk of fidelity to the Lord. For it is true, now as then, that he who stands forth in His Name, declaring His whole counsel, finds himself opposed. The temptation to make His Word smooth and acceptable, in order to avoid personal unpopularity, besets every true messenger. And only he whose secret hold upon Heaven is preserved inviolate can resist it. And it is just here that the grace of Christ, Who Himself endured the contradiction of sinners, is available and sufficient. Like Him we need fear man little when we fear God much. This is the secret of prophecy which extends the Kingdom that the man who is sent of God speaketh the words of God, and that God giveth not the Spirit by measure unto him.

His word was in mine heart as a burning fire.

JEREMIAH is a prophet because he cannot withstand the inner constraint of God's Word. This disclosure of his mind, and its changing moods, reveals him as one who is well aware of the difficulties of the position. But he cannot get away from the conviction that God means him to be His messenger. He realizes that there are perplexities in the message which he must deliver far beyond his own power of reasoning. He knows, too, that the slowness of its fulfilment must expose him to the derision of those who look upon it as a mere imagination of his own. And he confesses that these considerations have not been altogether without weight, and that he has had his moments of fear when he had almost determined no longer to speak in the Lord's Name. But the fire in his heart simply had to find vent.

It is the men who speak, not because they have to say something but because they have something to say, who carry the conviction of their hearers and who accomplish the work of God in the world. No man, indeed, can speak with authority until the Word has burned out the dross of his own soul—and still burns. As water becomes steam, so does every capacity become living energy when the fire of God lays hold of His servant. He needs no stimulus of human appreciation, nor encouragement of visible success. He cannot fight against the Divine Spirit who urges him to faithfulness. But how few of us who would fain speak burning words are willing for cleansing by fire in our own secret lives!

Inquire, I pray thee, of the Lord for us.

THIS recognition on the part of Zedekiah of the prophet's power of prayer, is a tribute to his life. Those who watched him, and were acquainted with his ways, realized the other-worldliness of his spirit. While touching life at every point of interest and need—as witness the breadth of his vision and the range of his prophecy—they saw in him a man whose life was, nevertheless, far removed above their own sphere. And when, in an emergency, they would seek the help of Heaven against their foes, it is to such an one as Jeremiah that they turn. He has established his right to be regarded as a man of God by the quality of his consistent conduct.

The ministry of intercession is the greatest privilege committed by the Lord to His people. It unites them to Him Who "ever liveth to make intercession," and is the most unselfish service of all the activities of His redeemed. "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man" becomes a mighty force in influencing the cause of the Kingdom. And it is incumbent, therefore, upon each of us to fit ourselves for its exercise. This means that, like the prophet, we must live before men so as to commend the truth we profess and the Lord Whom we represent. The hands which we would lift up in prayer must be holy and unstained. It is no costless thing to enter into the Secret Place bearing before God the burden of the sins and sorrows of others. For it demands a positively sacrificial purity which is not acquired without pain. But it is worth while.

But if ye will not hear these words.

THE knowledge that his message will not be generally accepted makes the heaviest demand upon Jeremiah's courage. Already assured that to some it will be "the savour of death unto death," he must indeed have heroic faith in God to stand up and declare His Word. For the rejection of the message involves the discredit of the messenger. And only one who has drunk deeply of the Spirit of his Lord can face this prospect with equanimity. It is on this account that the true servant of God must spend time in the secrecy of the Sanctuary. To be bowed before Heaven is the only preparation for being bold before the world.

The peril of disobedience to the proclamations of God's Word besets all who hear it. Nor is its seriousness ever disguised. In language which cannot be mistaken, the wrath of God is declared upon all who turn from His claims in contumacy or indifference. So that no man is unaware of the issues of his choice. And this we all need to bear in mind. For familiarity with the Word of God is apt to make us careless. The awe of having dealings with Him is lost by force of the frequency with which His Truth is proclaimed to us. And when it thus becomes as a common thing our danger is unspeakably great. The world is full of strange and specious voices alluring men to their ruin. Their fatal spell is recorded in the many whose lives have come to shipwreck by giving them heed, and who form a strong warning to us. Only they who listen for His word to do it are safe from the snare.

The Lord our Righteousness.

THIS is the core of the prophet's entire message. Anticipating the day of Israel's restoration, when once again she should realize the blessings that flow from true worship, and should herself become God's witness to the nations, he declares that her abiding conception of Him should be that of Righteousness. Taught by the discipline of exile to realize her own unrighteousness, the righteousness of God shall be acknowledged as the inspiration of all the painful experience through which she has passed. Pardoned, and redeemed from the hand of every foe, the nation's faith shall be in Him Who is the source of her every good, and Whose nature is the guarantee of her every future prosperity.

Beyond Israel's recovery, Jeremiah looks forward to the coming of Him Who, in the fulness of time, should be the incarnation of Divine righteousness and its fullest manifestation to men. For it is in Christ alone that the righteousness of God is brought near enough to avail for the world's salvation. On the ground of His life and death it is imputed to guilty sinners, who, despite their personal unworthiness, are accepted in Him. And by His Spirit it is imparted as an active principle of life to all who are united to Him by faith. Thus we are not only accounted righteous before God but are enabled also to live righteously before men. And the glory is His alone Whose seamless robe covers the most unworthy and Whose life animates all who put their trust in Him to the doing of the Will of God. These are they who abide for ever.

JEREMIAH xxiv. 5, 9.

For their good—For their hurt.

THE sword of the Lord is two-edged. Though its sharp strokes fell upon His people for their discipline, they fell also upon those whose hearts were stubborn under chastisement for their destruction. While He seeks the perfecting of His own, He executes punishment upon those who refuse correction. The same providential happening has thus an alternative and contradictory interpretation according to the spirit in which it is received. In the one case captivity should prove to be for the good, and in the other for the hurt of the people. And in either case its effect is conditioned, not by an arbitrary impulse on God's part but by their own attitude of heart toward Him.

We largely determine the treatment we receive at the Lord's hands. The man who becomes stubborn under His chastisements only assures to himself still sorer judgment. He who is not broken in penitence under the power of God will ultimately be broken in wrath. When, however, a man co-operates with the Will of God, he finds its apparent harshness to be full of tender compassion. But when he fights against it, he finds its strength invincible. How great is that folly which turns the gifts of His love into bitterness and forfeits the highest good of His purposes! We need to live close to Him day by day lest we misconceive His doings to our ultimate destruction. He is His own interpreter to those who are willing to learn of Him. But to those who play fast and loose with His commands there is a recoil of their own presumption which smites them with awful strength. God will not be mocked.

Because ye have not heard My words.

THE secret of all the disaster which had come, and was yet to come, upon Israel, was disobedience to the message of God through His servants. Against the widespread idolatry of the people, with all its consequent moral deterioration, the prophets arrayed themselves each in solitary heroism. Theirs was an unpopular course, for their proclamation cut clean across the self-will which had become Israel's governing and destructive passion. Authenticated though it was again and again by unmistakable signs, the message of these men nevertheless met with almost universal rejection. The people, not unnaturally, scorned that which condemned their profitable evil courses; and God's patience was strained to the utmost. Now, at length, through Jeremiah He declares it at an end; and this word is in the nature of a final proclamation.

Surely we have strong warning here against anything like trifling with Heaven's clear messages. When God speaks to men, by whatever means He chooses, they are faced with the alternative issues of life and death. Alas, that familiarity with the proclamation should make so many utterly careless of the tremendous import of the occasion. Like dry-rot in a tree trifling indifference grows unnoticed, until one day the storm of calamity completes its destruction. Let us beware, then, of all trifling insincerity in regard to that which means so much, and so intimately concerns eternal destiny. For we can put ourselves hopelessly out of reach of Divine help by our sheer perversity.

JEREMIAH XXVI. 14.

As for me, behold, I am in your hand.

THE splendid courage of the prophet is seen in his utter disregard of the personal consequence of faithfulness. He has declared unwelcome things to the people, and their rejection of his message involves him in unpopularity and scorn. It may well seem likely that in their anger and resentment they will even take his life. Yet this fear in no wise daunts him. He is confident that controlling their wrath is the permissive Will of God. He is His servant, and no shaft of the enemy's malice can hit him until He gives permission. His work cannot be interfered with until it is done. In his assurance he is able to tell the people that his life is in their hands, and that he cares not one whit for their threatenings. For he knows well that behind their hands are God's. Moreover, because he is His servant, he speaks in the calm tones which carry conviction.

God has in all ages tested His servants by withholding from them evidence of the success of their mission ; for it takes faith and loyalty of a high order to go on declaring a message which can only result in the overthrow of the messenger. Success is one of those lesser inspirations to faithfulness which all men find sweet ; and it is a mark of God's confidence that He should entrust any man with service in which it is withheld. Blessed is he who is content to work on in an unpopular cause, well satisfied with the reward of God's good pleasure. Such men are truly independent, and are at all times leaders who lead others to Him.

Make thee bonds and yokes, and put them upon thy neck.

THIS strange injunction laid upon Jeremiah was in the nature of an acted parable. It was God's way of bringing home to those who were indifferent to the prophet's sterner speeches the purposes of His Will in their coming judgment. Where ear-gate has failed it may be that eye-gate will furnish an entrance to their conscience. Such an action on the part of the prophet as that which he is here commanded might well single him out as a peculiar man, and make him the object of popular ridicule from which many an one would have shrunk. Such, however, was the quality of his consecration and the reality of his devotion to the service of God, that any consideration of that kind weighed with him not at all. He was confident in God that every command laid upon him must somehow be contributory to the fulfilment of his life-mission, whether he understood its import or not; and he obeyed it therefore without hesitation. It is thus at all times that God is best served by His servants.

The lesson which this symbolic action teaches is that life's conduct is equally important with life's speech in the service of God. There are things Christian men must do, and things also they must not do, which tell the message of the Kingdom far more loudly than any spoken words can ever do. Every act of the consecrated life has sacramental meaning and witness. Hence it is our first responsibility not merely to say what we have heard from God but to be what He has shown in the Great Pattern.

JEREMIAH xxviii. 15.

The Lord hath not sent thee.

WITH strange directness Jeremiah rebukes the false prophet. His is not the heat of anger, but the sincerity of truth. The people have been misled. Their confidence has been directed not toward the message of God, but toward a creation of mere human imagination. Making no moral demand upon them, it naturally received popular acclaim ; and Jeremiah, seeing the danger both to him who spoke and to the misled nation, did not hesitate to rebuke Hananiah and to unmask his pretensions. For not every one who speaks in the Name of the Lord is His prophet. There was lacking in him the evident spirit of one who had come forth from His Presence. The people were probably unable to discern anything amiss in him. But to one who was accustomed to the strong light of the Sanctuary the imposture was an open book.

How careful should we be who profess to speak in God's Name, that we are truly sent of Him. It by no means follows because a work is good, and its purpose apparently in general harmony with God's Word, that it is necessarily God's work for us. And we sin presumptuously when we take upon us any service to which He has not definitely commissioned us. On the other hand, when a man is sent of Him and speaks His Word, God gives not the Spirit by measure to him. Such an one always commends himself by unmistakable signs as the Lord's messenger in the Lord's message. And none of us need forfeit such honour if we really desire to serve Him.

When ye shall search for Me with all your heart.

HALF-HEARTED search for God is no search at all. Mere general intention results in nothing but increasing indifference and ultimate deadness. This was Israel's case. Again and again, when reminded of her need by calamities, she turned toward God—but without any serious purpose of moral amendment. Her prayer had no depth. Her penitence was without passion. Accustomed so long to regard external things as of greater moment than sincerity of heart, she was self-deceived. Hence nothing came of her professed return to God. So it is to a people hurt by the recoil of their own insincere religion that the prophet both reveals the ultimate peril of half heartedness, and declares for their encouragement the goodwill of the God Who has long sought them.

Unconscious insincerity grows upon us all except we be watchful. It is so easy to frame words of devotion, and so painful to bring forth fruit meet for repentance, that many are beguiled into taking the easier path to their undoing. For it is only when God is sought with full purpose of heart, and when the whole area of life is laid bare before Him, that men ever come to know Him. True, He is not far from any one of us ; but there is that between which must be destroyed with resolute purpose ere we can see His Face. Let no man deceive himself in this matter. For upon it depends everything of true good both in time and eternity. There can be no glossing over of our sins if we would have the answers of Divine love to our prayers. "All your heart" simply means what it says. And His eyes are as a flame of fire.

Fear thou not . . . for I am with thee, saith the Lord, to save thee.

THROUGHOUT Jeremiah's ministry his message is twofold. He declares in plainest terms God's judgment upon Israel's sin. By illustration, symbolic action, and direct speech, he brings home to the people the stern fact that their wandering from God must bring them to ultimate disaster. His judgments may tarry, but they are never uncertain ; and there is no escape open to a wilful and unrepentant people. At the same time, he ceaselessly declared the unchanging love of God and His concern that the nation should return to Him, promising that if they will forsake their sinful courses and penitently renew the vows of their first faith He will accept, restore, and bless them. It is his aim to identify all their experiences with God's presence. The alternatives of blight and blessing entirely depend upon His faithfulness, and their attitude in relation thereto. Hence it is that the prophet's notes of warning and encouragement harmonize.

Surely we may take this message to ourselves in respect of all the providences of life. It is not difficult to recognize God in His gifts, as we all know; but it is not so easy to recognize Him in their withdrawal. We readily own His power when circumstances are favourable ; but we are prone to forget that the stern discipline of trouble and sorrow is equally an evidence of His presence. And yet His Word is full of this assurance. Christ Himself has shown us what is the peace of a God-directed life, and has taught us that nothing that can affect His children is outside the range of the Father's care. How fearless, then, should we be in the confidence of such a love !

For they shall all know Me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the Lord.

JEREMIAH'S vision of the redeemed and restored nation is never that of mere material prosperity but of spiritual revival. True the nation is to be enriched and enlarged beyond anything previously known, but this was to be the mere outward evidence that God had come to His own in them. Putting Him first in the ordering of national life all these other things were added to them. It was only, however, by the aggregate faith of individuals that this should be accomplished. From the least to the greatest they should seek Him in response to His call. Each should own His rule and obey His precepts. And thus should the entire nation realize the beneficent results of His enthronement.

The prophet's vision in regard to Israel was, of course, only an anticipation of the Kingdom of Christ. What he conceived in regard to Israel has never yet been fulfilled. But it has found fulfilment in that Kingdom which is not of this world. There each subject derives his life by union with the living Head. Every one enters into direct personal relationship to Him, and sustains the obligation of individual obedience. And therein each is independent of the other, while at the same time contributing to the common life and service. For he who is taught of the Lord needs not that any man should teach him. It is the glory indeed of the Christian life that every one of us is capable of an unique appreciation of His will, and of an unique interpretation of Him to others. This is the true independence of the children of God, and the heritage which is ours to enjoy to-day.

Is there any thing too hard for Me?

IN order to reinforce the prophet's confidence in regard to the great and strange things which He is about to bring upon the nations, God challenges him in respect of his experience of His power. Jeremiah has proved in himself again and again the power of His might—nor ever has he found it inadequate to the carrying out of His declared purposes. Now he is asked to deduce the general from the particular, which is always the way of faith's reasoning. From what God has done in, and for, and through him, he is asked to confide in Him for greater events. That he does so, is clear from the fact of his subsequent proclamations. For he declares what God intends to do with all the assurance of a man who is himself convinced that he speaks truth.

Upon our conception of God depends our attitude to every one of life's problems and difficulties. These arise constantly to threaten our peace and daunt our courage, as we all know. Again and again we are brought right up against frowning difficulties and threatening enmities before which faith might well quail. And it is then that our conception of God, if it is adequate, saves us. For what can these do if He that is perfect in knowledge, and the Lord of all might, is with us? It is this confidence which has encouraged His people in all ages to go straight forward, cleaving a path through every tangled jungle, and levelling every mountain to prepare His way. What shall be our answer to this His challenge, and their example, which confront us in to-day's adverse circumstances?

I . . . will reveal unto them the abundance of peace and truth.

HOW generous are God's measurements! He never gives with niggardly hand, but always as befits sovereign wealth. It is not merely peace and truth which He promises to the afflicted people in response to their repentance but the abundance of these blessings. They have suffered much because of their sin; but all their sorrows shall be forgotten in the wealth of comfort, and the richness of blessing, in which He will assert Himself when once again they are at His feet. The wilfulness of evil has blinded their eyes to their true wealth. They have gone after that which has brought misery upon them and have been deluded into seeking things that could not profit. And they have lost all sense of real values. But God will open their eyes, and they shall yet see that in Him is their highest good. And seeing, they shall recover themselves.

How wonderfully is this promise fulfilled to us in Christ! He has fully and finally revealed the character of God for our enlightenment and enrichment. And it is in Him that we both learn the limitless magnitude of grace and find it available for our every need. Peace, which is the gift of heart-harmony with His Will; and truth, which is the ultimate solution of every human questioning—comprise all our varied needs. They bring an interpretation of eternity to the problems of time. And by their enduement alone we are able to walk worthily amid earth's shadows, holding forth the Word of life.

But afterward they turned.

THE test which God imposed upon the sincerity of the people's professed return to Him was that of the Levitical ordinance which enjoined the liberation of the slaves every seventh year. Under the impulse of the great emotion created by the national renewal of the Covenant they all eagerly acquiesced and set free their bond-servants. When, however, the emotion had died down, and they had time to realize the full cost of their impulsive action, they repented of their rashness and made those whom they had set free return again to their service! The seriousness of their action was not only in their repudiation of their own vows but in their treatment of the Word of the Lord. For it showed an indifference to its holiness which could not but recoil upon themselves disastrously.

There are many who, like Israel, make promise of obedience to God's requirements, and actually begin to order their lives accordingly, but who, when they discover all that it means loyally to obey His rule, turn back and "walk no more with Him." Their fault is in not sitting down first and counting the cost of obedience—for this He never disguises. No man is ever lured into professing loyalty to God by having the way made to appear easier than it actually is. It is, indeed, attesting proof that the word is His, that it frankly declares all that is involved in fulfilling it. And this is designed to save us from the peril of turning our backs upon Him. How careful should we be in registering our vows!

Because ye have obeyed . . . therefore thus saith the Lord of hosts.

THE Rechabites are the forerunners of all who prove faithful under severe test. By the promise of Jonadab they had bound themselves with the Nazarite vow of abstinence from wine. It was an expression of their consecration to the service of God, and was well understood as such by the entire nation. It is surely a light upon God's part in the temptation of His people that Jeremiah should be commanded to set wine before them, not for the purpose of their defilement but for the strengthening of their resolve. For virtue is only strengthened by resistance of evil. No chain is stronger than its weakest link. If the Rechabites are to be an instrument in God's hand for the carrying out of His Will, they must be tested as to the reality and strength of their moral purpose. That they were victorious, indignantly refusing to defile themselves with the wine set before them, marked them out as meet for His service, and secured to them the promise of His acceptance.

Many a man who trusts in God for his own salvation is not trusted by God in His service. For his faith is directed rather to receiving God's gifts than to fitting himself for God's use. But it is always true to say that when any man sets resolutely before him, as the ideal of his life, stern faithfulness to all that is implied in Christian consecration, God accepts and uses him to the utmost. If we are not being used of Him the reason is to be sought within ourselves.

Take thee again another roll, and write in it all the former words that were in the first roll.

THUS does God answer the contumacy of Jehoiakim, the king of Judah. He had cut and burned the scroll which contained an unwelcome message of the evils which should come upon him and his house for their sin against God. In his madness he imagined that, by treating the prophet's message with contempt, he was showing himself independent of its threatening. But the Word of the Lord is not so easily put out of men's lives. Hence, just as in earlier days He renewed the broken tables of the Law by Moses, so now He repeats in the same form the message which the king had proudly thrust from him. Men cannot evade God by the simple expedient of treating His Word either with negligence or hostility. For the last word is with Him—not with them.

How good it is that God does not take us at our first word of refusal! He renews to us mercies which we treated with indifference, and brings back to us opportunities which we have wilfully squandered. Were this not so, there are few of us who would be in His service to-day. For few of us embraced the first overtures of His love or obeyed the first calls of His Gospel. And still fewer of us have consistently obeyed His Word as we have known it. How wonderful is the grace which favours us with new offers and makes new beginnings possible! Surely none need feel himself for ever disqualified, since He abideth faithful. And none need ever conclude that he is cast off because of his unreadiness. For His is the love which simply will not let us go our own way without effort to stay us.

Wherefore the princes were wroth with Jeremiah, and smote him, and put him in prison.

FAITHFULNESS to God involved the prophet in the common experience of those who count His Will the law of their lives. It would have been easy for Jeremiah to placate those whom he angered, had he been content to speak smooth things to them—the things they wanted to hear. But the true servant of God is much more concerned with what men need to hear than what they desire. It is a small thing with him that he should gain any man's approval, if in so doing he forfeits the Lord's "Well done." And it is the more courageous in Jeremiah's case because the issues of faithfulness were not disguised. He knew full well what it must lead to, and yet he boldly declared what had been committed to him.

The outraged princes might cast the prophet into the dungeon, but they could neither quench his faith nor arrest his influence. Hence it was that from the prison he is sent for by the king, when his fears are aroused, as being the one man in the kingdom who was certain to know God's mind and purpose. And he returned again to the prison, having refused another opportunity of escape by compromise! For he was convinced that it is better far to be behind bars with God than to be at liberty without Him. Who shall say that, like Paul in later days, he did not find the inner court into which he was thrown a very trysting-place with Him to Whom his life was pledged? For so it ever is that the Lord turns the wrath of men to His praise.

Put now these old cast clouts and rotten rags under thine armholes under the cords.

INSIGNIFICANT as the action of Ebed-melech might appear, it was nevertheless an expression of thoughtfulness as kindly as it is rare in any age. Commanded by the king to take Jeremiah up from the dungeon when he was emaciated with hunger and at the point of death, he realized that the enfeebled prophet had no strength to grasp a rope, and would have to be drawn up by means of a noose round his body. At the same time, it was obvious that in his condition the ropes must chafe him severely and cause him sore pain. So he devised the plan of using these old clouts and rotten rags to act as pads, by means of which the sharp cutting into the prophet's flesh by the ropes should be obviated. Truly an act of kindness well worthy of a place in the Divine record. Ebed-melech is the father of all those who go about doing kindly deeds to less fortunate men.

What value does the Word of God set upon acts of service which seem trifling enough in themselves, but which, all unknown to the doers oftentimes, very really help the larger purposes of God's Kingdom! This action, for instance, helped to save the prophet's life, with consequences by no means negligible to God's people. And the cup of cold water which Christ commended may well save some one from fainting who will yet become a great power in the blessing of others. Or the visit paid, like that of Titus to Paul, to a discouraged disciple, may have usefulness far beyond measure. The great thing for us all is to seek so to be filled with the Spirit of Christ, Who Himself went about doing good, that we do not fail to see nor to seize our opportunities.

Because thou hast put thy trust in Me, saith the Lord.

GOD is never unrighteous to forget the work of faith and labour of love of His people. Ebed-melech the Ethiopian, a stranger in Babylon, had already proved his trust in God by his kindness to Jeremiah. Now when the prophet is once again at liberty, dwelling among the people and free to declare the Word of the Lord, he is sent with a message of reassurance and comfort to him. Just as Rahab the harlot was singled out for deliverance in the fall of Jericho, so he was to be saved in the sack of the city by the Chaldeans. She showed kindness to Joshua's spies, and he, to God's prophet; and in both cases these actions expressed individual trust in God, in contrast to the prevalent indifference. Such faith never fails to secure His approval.

Faith is often found in unexpected places. It may not always be able to speak the shibboleths of the Churches, but in so far as it is sincere toward God, and loyal in its purpose of obedience, it is accepted of Him. Its knowledge may be far from complete while its quality is entirely sufficient. And it is good to be assured that the Lord knoweth them that trust Him, even though His children may not have their acquaintance. The story of Ebed-melech surely encourages each of us to live unto the Lord alone, in obedience to every ray of light from the Sun of Righteousness which has shone into our hearts. We can well leave faith's reward to Him, even though for a while it tarries.

JEREMIAH xl. 3.

Now the Lord hath brought it, and done according as he hath said.

IT speaks volumes for Jeremiah's consistent life that Nebuzar-adan, the captain of the guard, should so openly identify himself with him. He recognized that the prophet's warning messages had all been fulfilled, and that he was the proven servant of high Heaven. The liberty which he gave him, and the opportunity he proffered of continued residence in Babylon under new conditions or of returning to his own land, are at the same time the reward of faithfulness to God, and the acknowledgment that he has commended himself also to man. Jeremiah has never claimed to be anything other than a messenger. He has not spoken out of his own imagination, but as it has been delivered to him to speak by God. Hence, when his prophetic warning has come to pass, even those who do not know Him realize that this is the Lord's doing.

Nothing is so powerful of impression as character. It is not what we say so much as what we are that actually tells for God among those with whom we live. Men are, as a rule, but little interested in mere religious theory, but are inevitably arrested by the translation of such theory into actual fact in the lives of God's professed servants. If we would worthily represent Him—which is our high calling—we must put the cultivation of consistent holiness in the forefront of our faith and prayer. And we shall find that God co-operates with all who seek thus to honour Him, and turns their effort into His own victory.

When Johanan . . . heard of all the evil that Ishmael the son of Nethaniah had done . . . (he) went to fight with Ishmael.

ISHMAEL'S treachery could not fail to arouse a passion of indignation in every true man. Johanan, evidently the chief of the army, was moved with the righteous purpose of bringing him to account for an attack of so callous a nature, and for such unbridled cruelty. The whole story, sordid though it may seem to our minds, is by no means unrelieved by gleams of good. For it is surely good that men should be found who hate evil and injustice enough to risk their very lives in bringing about its punishment and overthrow. Whatever Johanan's other qualities may have been, this certainly stands to his credit—that he could not look on unmoved when helpless women and children were suffering. It is passion of this sort which ever inspires great deeds.

From altogether another standpoint we see this same thing reflected in Christ, and in His people. Who can read the record of His earthly life without realizing that He is engaged upon a crusade against sin in its every form? It was to destroy the works of the devil that He lived and died. And it is to fight against evil in the world that He has equipped His followers with the breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the spirit, and has sent them forth as the knights of God. Never for a single day are we exempt from this warfare if we follow in His train. Has He not called us to be soldiers? And does He not Himself go out at the head of His army—the Captain of our Salvation?

I will show mercies unto you, that he may have mercy upon you.

IT was the prophet's purpose to hearten and encourage the people who feared that the hostile strength of the king of Babylon would prove too much for them. They knew their own weakness, and were probably quite accurate in their estimate of their inability to withstand him. But Jeremiah sought to lift their eyes to Him Who was greater far and Who had covenanted their safety. For God will dispose the heart of the king of Babylon toward them, and will show them favour at his hands which cannot be accounted for on any other ground than the control of his heart by the One Who purposed His people's good. But the people must not lose sight of the fact that it is God Himself Who alone makes them to dwell in safety.

Just as the sovereign mercy of God is behind the mercy of the king of Babylon, so behind all the gifts which enrich life for His people is the control of His love. Every experience by which we are helped, and every providence which brings gladness into our lives, is an expression of His gracious concern. Behind earthly friendship is the Great Friendship. Behind tender human love lies the Greater Love. Behind the inspiring approvals of our fellows is His "Well done." When this is borne in mind it transfigures earth's brightest as well as its dullest hours, and inspires us to grateful praise and unmeasured service. For who can worthily respond to "Love so amazing, so Divine" except by the surrender of life's entire powers to the service of His Name?

So they came into the land of Egypt: for they obeyed not the voice of the Lord.

DESPITE Jeremiah's faithful warning as to Israel's search for asylum in Egypt, the heart of the people was set upon this course. It appealed to them on many grounds, and seemed to promise so certainly what they desired, that the counsel of God was contemptuously set aside. Their journey prospered moreover, and they attained their goal. For the serious consequences of departure from the path of obedience are not always immediately made manifest. It is part of the deceitfulness of sin that for a while it brings a sort of prosperity which blinds men to its sure issues. Thus Israel had by no means escaped the evils foretold by Jeremiah because they did not immediately come upon them. God's Word is settled for ever in Heaven, and time is His servant.

It is never, under any circumstances, a trifling thing to disobey the Word of the Lord. To know His Will is to be involved in the responsibility of doing it. And for any man to treat this obligation lightly is but to assure himself of ultimate disaster. And yet how thoughtlessly we are prone to make excuses for our own shortcoming in this respect, masking the real cause of every defection—that our hearts are not perfect toward Him. For the secret of unfailing obedience is unfailing love. If we loved Him truly, in return for the great love wherewith He has loved us, we should find His yoke easy, His burden light, and all His commandments acceptable. Shall we not seek thus, at the very source, to assure our lives of worthy quality?

We will certainly do whatsoever thing goeth forth out of our own mouth.

TO such lengths will men go who begin by playing fast and loose with God's commandments. After repeated warnings by Jeremiah, and an unmistakably clear call to renounce their idolatrous practices with the moral evil which these brought in their train, the men of Judah made determined answer which was nothing less than a declaration of considered enmity against God. It is as though they were utterly maddened by the heady wine of their own contumacy. All pretence of fealty to Him is cast off. They stand naked and unashamed in the avowal that they will have none of His interference with their self-willed purposes. They will continue to worship idols, and to burn incense to the Queen of Heaven, come what may. And it is significant to note that they justify their action by the fact that these practices had brought them material prosperity.

No man ever reaches this stage of passionate disavowal of God except by a longer or shorter process of trifling disobedience. Such a course begins by unfaithfulness to light, and by the fond self-delusion that God takes no note of things so small and negligible. Whereas, in fact, the record of all such unfaithfulness is indelibly written upon a man's own heart and character. The wages of sin is sin,—and yet more sin, until, when some crisis challenges, the hidden deterioration is made manifest. How watchful should we be over the beginnings of evil. At its source it may be checked ; at its estuary the stream of its influence cannot even be measured.

Seekest thou great things for thyself? seek them not.

IN these words Jeremiah is commanded to relieve the dismay of Baruch, who is discouraged because of the seeming failure of God's Word among the people. Taking the darkest view of things, he imagines that all his work has been in vain. And there is, perhaps, more than a little personal resentment that he should himself be brought into some measure of contempt in consequence. Jeremiah, who is deeper in the secret of the Lord, and who has for himself come to realize the sovereignty of His Will, seeks to uplift him by declaring the certainty of Divine judgment, and by assuring him that it matters not in the least what happens to His servant so long as His purposes are not thwarted.

Baruch, like many another, has done the work of the Lord with motives not altogether unmixed with selfish interest. He has both realized and enjoyed the honour of being His messenger, and has coveted the power and glory of leadership. While imagining that he was wholly sincere, he has been seeking great things for himself rather than for his Lord. Hence the reaction upon his own spirit of disappointment. For when a man is more jealous for his own good name, his reputation, or his position before men, than he is for God's honour, he is bound to be disillusioned. God will not give His glory to another, even to His most zealous servant. And those who forget this really stand in His way. Christ has for ever given us direction, which, if obeyed, will both save us from disheartenment and accomplish Heaven's highest purposes, in His injunction: "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God."

I will not make a full end of thee, but correct thee in measure.

GOD'S ways are never unequal. Justice and judgment are the foundation of His throne. Although the nation at large is to be punished it is not to be entirely destroyed. There is a faithful remnant who have not bowed the knee to Baal, albeit they have been more or less involved in the social evils of which the whole land is guilty. It may be that, their protest being ineffective, they have been content to fall in with the general scheme of things, though all the while their hearts have been out of harmony and their consciences uneasy. At any rate, the lamp of faith has not been entirely put out in them. And, hence, in the coming day of the Lord, though they are to be chastened they are not to be killed, nor their name to be blotted out.

While God forgives the sin of His people, the fact of forgiveness does not cancel all its consequences. And the consequence of old sin is always part of the discipline of the new life. It is only by permitting outraged law to assert itself in life that He can bring home to us the sinfulness of sin and the holiness of His commandments. It is only by allowing us to feel the bitter smart of evil's lesser penalties that He trains us to avoid its ultimate destructions. And all the while He gives us the assurance of His own Presence, and the consciousness that the hand which wields the rod is the hand of eternal Love. This should, at all times, save us from resentment at those providences which appear to be harsh and arbitrary. For He is making—not unmaking us by them.

O thou sword of the Lord . . . put up thyself into thy scabbard, rest, and be still.

PART of Jeremiah's message was to the enemies of Israel, amongst them the Philistines. Although they had from time to time been used as the sword of the Lord for the punishment of His people, they had offended against Him by their cruelties, robberies, and strife, and in turn they must suffer punishment at His hand. Vividly does the prophet declare the nature of the judgment which was to be executed upon them by the Egyptians their hereditary foes. So sore and unresting would it be, and so obvious to them that behind the Egyptian fury was the might of the God of Israel, that they should cry out for the sheathing of His sword—and they should cry in vain. For God's Will concerning them has been declared and is immutable.

It is in days of calamity that men come to recognize what in brighter days they have utterly neglected. The entire history of the Philistines, so far as it relates to the God of Israel, is one of indifference and contempt. They regarded Him as being merely the tribal Deity of their weaker neighbours, and refused Him all allegiance in favour of Dagon their own chief idol. Now, however, when His stroke is to fall upon them, they will recognize Him as Jehovah, and cry in vain for His mercy. How often is their experience repeated in human life! We fail to acknowledge God in the gifts of His grace, accepting as commonplace and without gratitude the intimations of His care. When, however, the sterner providences overtake us, we pray; and the burden of our prayer is for relief from the very thing we can least afford to be without. For it is the judgments of God which ultimately are our true enrichment.

JEREMIAH xlviii. 10 (R.V.).

Cursed be he that doeth the work of the Lord negligently.

THE history of Moab is closely intertwined with that of Israel. They have been at times enemies, and at times allies. And ever and anon God has seen fit to use the Moabites for the furtherance of His purposes in His people. Now through Jeremiah He declares the judgment of Moab's unworthiness and insincerity. Holding Israel in contempt, she has really been contemptuous of God. And her pride is to be brought down. Conspicuous amongst the charges brought against her is that of doing the Lord's work entrusted to her negligently. Fond of her own ease, Moab has sacrificed thoroughness for self-pleasure, and that, when the issues were so great. Now Nemesis in the shape of the spoiler is to overtake her. The curse is simply the recoil of moral indifference.

The work of the Lord is always a serious matter, and no man treats it lightly without himself suffering loss. It makes demands upon our every resource, and calls for the sacrifice of all self-interest. The seriousness of its issues demands the utmost concentration of care and energy. And for any one to treat it lightly, or to carry it out carelessly, is sin which never escapes judgment. For Christ calls his followers to utmost strenuousness in a task great enough to require the fullest devotion of life in us, as in Him. In such service negligence is the unpardonable fault. Nothing is more needed to-day than a recovery of a serious conception of the Lord's work. It is not a matter for light-hearted trifling, since the eternal destiny of men is bound up with its faithful discharge.

Dwell deep, O inhabitants of Dedan.

QUITE apart from its significance in Jeremiah's declaration against Edom, this word has an application and meaning for every age. The people were about to be visited by God in punishment for sin. And it is in the nature of counsel to them to seek sanctuary in the deep caverns of their rocky fastnesses where they should be hidden from the foes by whom the Divine judgment would be executed. From this it is no far cry to the greater calamity in which all men are involved, and the greater Refuge which is available to all. For Christ is the only hope of the world, and in Him alone are men safe to-day, as in the coming visitation. To "dwell deep" in His love, and to shelter ourselves in the unmeasured faithfulness of His sacrifice, is to be assured that all is well.

We may well take this word also as indicating the secret of all effective service for God. For He uses those who are content that they themselves should be completely hidden and that Christ alone should be seen in and through them. Self-obtrusiveness is of all hindrances the greatest in the work of the Kingdom. How many a promising enterprise has been utterly spoiled by it! In making our plans for the wide expansion of Christ's work, we need to remember that a prior necessity is of a deeper life in Him—deeper faith, deeper union, and deeper hold upon His promises. To live superficially is a temptation to us all. To live deeply is the foreseeing and protective call of the Gospel voiced for ever in the Saviour's direction—"if a man abide not in Me he is cast forth."

JEREMIAH l. 5.

They shall ask the way to Zion with their faces thitherward.

IN the midst of his prophecy against Babylon, and his forecast of the evils that will overtake its people, the prophet breaks off to foretell the restoration of captive Israel. It is the Lord's hand which alone can unlock the prison gates, and it is to Him they will seek for guidance and protection in their return to their own land. Their cry will go up to Heaven while their faces are turned toward the south and their eyes are strained in looking toward Jerusalem. And their sincerity of purpose, and reality of repentance, shall secure them answering assurance from God. They shall not fail to find their way back, since He Who led their fathers through the desert by cloud and fire is with them still—the unchanged Lord.

There are many whose prayers are unanswered because their faces are not set toward the goal they profess to desire. They ask for pardon, but their eyes are still upon the fascinations of their sin. They vaguely desire God's blessing, but do not set themselves with resolute purpose toward the standards of holiness. They pray that His Kingdom may come, but do not gird themselves and set out to work at its tasks. All such prayer, if it can be so called, is foredoomed to failure. For God regards the sincerity of our hearts as of infinitely greater moment than the accuracy of our language. And sincerity of heart is expressed by the resolute turning of the face toward Zion and of the feet into the way of His testimonies, far more than by our speech or song. May it not well be that some of us ask and have not because, in this respect, we ask amiss?

For Israel hath not been forsaken, nor Judah of his God, of the Lord of hosts.

PART of Jeremiah's commission is to assure God's people that, despite all their vicissitudes, He has not relaxed His hold upon them. It might seem as though their experiences of suffering pointed to the fact that He had left them to the consequence of their sin, and had turned His ear from their anguished cry. In reality, however, it was because He loved them that He chastened them. The interpretation of their every trying experience is found alone in the fact of His unchanging care. Through all the variation of their loyalty and fluctuation of their faith His purpose concerning them never altered; and though He must bring them through fire and water it is always into a wealthy place that He directs their going. That they should realize this is necessary to their endurance. And so the prophet breaks off his declamation against Babylon to speak this message of light and encouragement to Israel.

It has ever been the error of God's people to misread His judgment and to mistake His intention. Nor are we free of this same error to-day. When things seem perverse, and our experience appears to contradict the Divine assurances, we are prone to conclude that His favour has been forfeited and that life has somehow fallen from His control. Whereas, in reality, He is never so near as when He is invisible to sight. The darkest hour is His as well as the brightest. And if we can but rest upon this certainty, one day we shall see, as now is impossible, that He has been with us always, even unto the end.

Every day a portion until the day of his death, all the days of his life.

THE treatment of Jehoiakim, the exiled king of Judah, by the king of Babylon, forms a bright close to the record of Jeremiah's ministry. For indirectly it confirms his strong declarations of God's unchanging love. It was hard for a people, far from their own land and under the oppression of a heathen nation, to realize anything but calamity in their circumstances. The severity of their case appeared entirely to conflict with the hopes they had built upon the Divine promises. And in their depression Jeremiah had again and again sought to uplift their hearts by declaring God's faithfulness. When they saw their king taken from prison, and treated with kindness and honour by the monarch who held them all captive, they could not fail to realize in this a fulfilment, in part at least, of the prophet's word.

The completeness of the provision made for the daily needs of the liberated sovereign is a tribute to the quality of the king of Babylon's intention. He did not satisfy himself with a spasmodic act of generosity, but, carefully, and with calculation, he arranged for Jehoiakim's support. And every day his existence on the royal bounty was testimony to God's care for His people. For "the hearts of kings are in His rule and governance," and He can dispose them toward the fulfilment of His purposes, and for the good of His own people. Behind all human authority resides the sovereign power which controls it. Thus, in its ordering, is His faithfulness seen in our own day as in Jeremiah's.

Behold, and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow.

THE prophet speaks out of the fulness of a heart burdened with concern for his nation. He has spoken to them the Word of God, and they have, for the most part, received it indifferently. He has called them to repentance; but his voice has fallen on unheeding ears. He has encouraged them with rich promises of the Divine favour; but they have preferred the carnal delights at hand. In consequence, he is a disappointed and broken man, whose heart is burdened both with the failure of his own mission and with the present state and future destiny of a people to whom he is bound by ties not only of natural affinity but of spiritual obligation. Since they will not turn to the Lord their God the brightness has gone out of life for him. And he sorrows over them with godly sorrow.

Jeremiah's concern for Israel is at once reflective and prophetic. He is but reflecting the sorrow of the God Whose messenger he is. In secret communion he has drunk in His Spirit, and it is out of a love, Heaven-derived, that he utters this lament. And standing, as he does, before the people as God's representative, he is but an anticipation of Him Who, in the fulness of time, came to reveal God fully and finally to the world—the "Man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief." Only great love is capable of great sorrow; and the depth of Christ's grief is measured by His fathomless affection for men. Shall we not fear to add to His pain of heart by any indifference of ours?

Her prophets also find no vision from the Lord.

THIS is the crowning calamity of all. Worse far than material misfortunes is the fact that those who ought to be Israel's moral guides have themselves become blind. By their own connivance at a national defection from God they have lost power to understand or to interpret His mind. In consequence, except for Jeremiah the rejected, the sources of moral inspiration are all dried up. When such is the case in any nation there can be but one result Religious deterioration is bound to set in when the high standards of God's requirements are unappreciated by the leaders of a people, and hence are unimposed upon their life. It is as true now as in that day that "where there is no vision the people perish."

Christ has for ever settled the charter of the true life in His declaration of the blessedness of "the pure in heart." To them it is given to "see God," that is, to read and understand His Will. And theirs, too, is the unspeakable privilege of interpreting it to a world still in darkness. It is in this sense that all His people are to be prophets; and it is for their equipment for this service that the rich gifts of His Spirit are bestowed. His indwelling power cleanses their hearts continually, and clarifies their vision. He alone interprets the mind of God to their understanding. And it is entirely in His power that they are enabled to fulfil all the responsibilities of this service. Let us not fail our generation, which needs the prophetic ministry more than aught else, by failing Him.

It is good that a man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the Lord.

THE prophet's blackest day is not without its glad hour. Upon his dark soliloquy there falls the bright ray of God's mercy, quickening his memory and recalling to his heart the faithfulness which has ever been the foundation and support of his life. For as the ultimate fact of his experience has not been calamity, but the goodness of God, so his persistent mood is not of gloom but of hope. It is well for him, and for his auditors also, that memory comes to the aid of faith to reinforce it. And this is his conclusion—that God does not fail the man who waits for Him and is content to tarry His leisure for the fulfilment of His promises.

The danger of impatience with God is always with us. Like Christ's early disciples, we are prone to think that the Kingdom of God should immediately appear. The slowness of His methods is often a sore trial to our faith and shortsightedness. And yet it is to him who knows how to wait that God reveals His mind, and upon him that He bestows His riches. Spiritual illumination and power is not a sudden acquisition so much as a steady accumulation. We need to take time, and to curb the restlessness of our spirits, if we would really learn the secrets of the Lord, and how to interpret them as His messengers. And it is only when we wait upon Him that we come to realize that deliverance from bondage to self and sin and fear which alone makes us competent to carry on His service.

In our watching we have watched for a nation that could not save us.

THIS is the end of all human confidence. The foreign alliances, against which all the prophets protested, have brought Israel to ultimate disaster. And now at length, with their spirit broken and their hopes disappointed, Jeremiah sees the people at an utter end of themselves. They have come to realize the futility of their faithless wandering from God. They have reaped the fruit of their thoughts and have found it bitter. They have at last learned that the arm of flesh is not to be trusted, and that the only sure confidence of those who know the Lord is in HIM. With strained eyes they have watched for the help that did not come; and now those eyes are red with weeping. Sore disappointment has at last disillusioned them; and with shame of face the prophet sees them willing to return to Him from Whom they have so long held aloof. If they can only capture and make permanent this mood—and that can only be done by acting upon it—Israel shall be saved from further disaster and recovered unto the service and purpose of God.

As with a nation, so with individuals. It is only when we have proved the insufficiency of all human help in the great struggle we have to wage with sin, that we turn to the Lord to realize that in Him is our help found. By many a painful disappointment our eyes are at length opened to the unavoidableness of final defeat, with all that that means, unless we can secure Divine reinforcement. And, thank God, none ever seeks Him in this spirit of self-despair who does not find Him faithful to His Word and ever ready to "welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve."

Turn thou us unto Thee, O Lord, and we shall be turned.

AT last the prophet is able to voice the prayer of a people which understands not only the worthlessness of all human help but its own innate powerlessness also. For in the school of affliction this lesson has been well learned, that apart from His enabling none can truly turn to the Lord. If men are to seek Him it can only be in response to His searching for them. If they are to love Him their love can only be reflective of His. That all Heavenward movement is reciprocal, and not original, was discovered long before Christ said that no man can come unto Him but as the Father draws him. In declaring this the Lord was simply giving expression to the common consciousness of all who, in every age, have had dealings with the Most High.

How often do we feel our utter inability to gird ourselves to prayer, to repentance, or to devotion! How often does the deadness of our souls oppress us, so as to make even the effort of approach to God seem worthless! And how often have we yielded to this mood, to our undoing! Surely we may take Israel's prayer and make it our own, when this sense of utter powerlessness oppresses us. We may ask Him to turn us, when we cannot turn ourselves toward the Light: to draw us, when we have no power to leave earth's attractions or to cast off the bonds that are upon us. And if the prayer of our helplessness is sincere, and we are honestly willing to obey the motions of His Spirit, we may at all times find deliverance thus.

EZEKIEL i. 3.

The hand of the Lord was there upon him.

LIKE a refrain, this record runs through the whole of the book of Ezekiel's prophecy. Called to be God's messenger at a time of singular difficulty, the prophet was strengthened for all that his service involved by the steadying consciousness of God's presence. Nearer to him than the circumstances of the captivity, and stronger than the untoward influences which surrounded him, was the sense of the Divine fellowship. It was as though the hand of the Lord was laid upon him in power both of restraint and constraint. Knowing well his own feebleness, he realized a strength outside of himself, and thus was made fearless to speak to the conscience of his people and to declare God's plans for them. The moral demands which his message made could not fail to involve him in unpopularity, and possible hostility. Strong in the power of the Hand laid upon him, he never flinched on this account. Like all in every age who have done God's service amongst men, he could do all things through Him.

To live under the hand of the Lord is surely the ideal for us all. For, apart from His guidance, we are prone to mistake the pathway, and, without His enablement, we are too often ready to turn from the way of difficulty which we clearly see. That He has promised never to withdraw from us His upholding is part of the glory of the Gospel. That we fail to realize it is part of life's greatest tragedy. For our failure is always caused by some disobedience. If we go aside from His commandments, we forfeit the covenanted enduements which alone fit us to fulfil our high calling.

Open thy mouth, and eat that I give thee.

EZEKIEL'S preparation for service lay in his personal understanding of the Will and Word of God. Under the figure of a book, which he was charged to eat, it is brought home to him that only by first assimilating Divine truth can he assert it with power of conviction. The Word must be his own sustenance before it becomes on his lips a living message to others. He must learn in his own life the ways of the Spirit before he can become the teacher of his captive brethren. That he was bewildered at the command to eat, is not to be wondered at. That he obeyed, is evidence of his faith in the wisdom and sovereignty of Israel's God.

It is so with all who are called to proclaim the Gospel in any way. The Living Word must first become bread to the eater, and then seed to the sower. Only that which has really become part of our lives, by prayerful meditation and unquestioned obedience, can we give to others. And it is here that so much Christian work fails. Mental apprehension of the Truth takes the place of spiritual experience. Men tell what they see rather than what they know. Under such circumstances language becomes mere sounding brass and tinkling cymbal. For it is only as the Word is made flesh that it acquires redemptive values. The teacher must himself be taught. The leader must himself be led. The husbandman that laboureth must be first partaker of the fruits. The Evangel must be distilled from experience. Thus it was in Christ's coming; and thus also it is in the going forth of His people in His Name.

EZEKIEL iii. 18.

His blood will I require at thine hand.

IT was as a watchman that the prophet was commissioned by God. His responsibility was to warn the House of Israel in terms given to him direct from Heaven. There was entrusted to him a message fraught with eternal possibilities—a savour of life unto life and of death unto death—according to its reception by the hearers. So great was the responsibility of being put in trust with such an Evangel, that Ezekiel is faithfully warned by the Lord as to the seriousness of any shortcoming on his part. If he failed to sound out the word of awakening and alarm, so that wicked men were not arrested in their courses but continued therein to their destruction, he should be held accountable for them. Entirely according to his faithfulness would the favour or disfavour of God be bestowed upon him.

Nothing can be more serious than any lightness or trifling with Christ's commission to His people to declare His Gospel. For the destiny of souls is involved in our courageous obedience. How shall they repent and turn to Him except they hear His Word? And how shall they hear if we do not regard our trust as a sacred obligation and, at all costs, declare the Truth? There is positive sin in not doing that for which we have been saved and called. Did we always realize that the fortune or fate of souls is in some way involved in the fulfilment of our obligation to Christ, how differently should we live! We should buy up every opportunity, and look upon every unsaved one as our personal care. It is in this spirit that souls are won and Christ's heart is satisfied.

So shalt thou bear the iniquity of the house of Israel . . . of the house of Judah.

GOD uses His servant not only to speak His message but himself to be a sign also to His people. The strange conduct to which he is commanded has symbolic meaning both for him and for them. It is God's way of arresting their attention as well as of securing his allegiance. Ezekiel is to bear the burden of the national sin. He is so to enter into fellowship with God Himself in this respect, that the iniquity of the people shall become positive pain to him, their indifference a weight upon his spirit, and their reclamation the first charge upon his moral energies. God makes plain to him the fact that to be His representative is not a matter of ease and honour, but of toil and travail. The sincerity of his surrender to His purpose is attested by his continuance in such service.

Christ has called His disciples to follow in His steps. He has committed to them the privileged service of bearing one another's burdens; and has sent them out to share with Him also the burden of the world's great need. As they partake of His Spirit, and are renewed into His nature, this burden becomes heavier, until, like Himself, they cannot hold back from utmost sacrifice in making the redeeming love of God known to men. Having lost their own burden for ever at the foot of His Cross, they gladly henceforth take His yoke upon them. And, united to Him in a persistent purpose and by an uninterrupted ministry of His Spirit, they count not their own lives dear unto them in the service to which He leads them forth. Of such is the Kingdom increased.

Surely, because thou hast defiled My sanctuary . . . neither shall Mine eye spare.

IT is significant that the sin with which Ezekiel is commissioned to charge Israel is strangely connected with worship. It would seem as though, while despising God's commandments, the people have maintained a show of devotion. Along with their determined self-will, which led to unmentionable idolatries, they yet continued to offer sacrifice and to profess allegiance to God. They honoured Him with their lips but their hearts were far from Him; and, in His judgment, their conduct defiled His House. For it was idle mockery to observe the externals of His service while contemptuous and defiant of His law. It is in the nature of His holiness that such inconsistency must bring upon its perpetrators certain judgment. He cannot maintain His own character if He is complacent under such affront.

Is there no meaning for us in this stern declaration? The ease with which we make spiritual profession, and yet disregard its moral obligation, would surely alarm us did we but read this lesson aright. For true worship is in spirit and in truth; and we degrade the faith we profess when conduct contradicts creed and when self-will denies God's hold. And though He is long-suffering, His tolerance has an end; hence, sooner or later, retribution overtakes those who are indifferent to the claims of righteousness. "Thou shalt be sincere with the Lord thy God," is an injunction which in this day, as in Israel's, governs every direction of Christian worship.

So will I stretch out My hand upon them.

THE putting forth of God's power upon His people is either for blessing or for blight. Those who earnestly seek Him, and by continuance in well-doing endeavour to adjust their lives to His requirement, never fail of His favour. On the other hand, those who despise Him, as did Israel in Ezekiel's day, are only assuring to themselves sore punishment. The Hand that might have been filled with gifts is turned upon them in discipline and chastisement. But it is always their attitude toward His law which determines their experience of His power. While the prophet could utter no more fearful word than this, nor conjure to their view more awesome prospect, how different might have been the meaning of these same words had the people been willing and obedient!

Israel had degraded her conception of God by her indifference to His precepts, until He had become to them a mere good-natured abstraction. They thought of Him as One to Whom they could turn when distress was upon them, but Whom they could ignore under normal circumstances. Thus it was that they tempted Him by their idolatries, and brought upon themselves swift punishment. They simply played fast and loose with God to their own undoing. And too often the same is the case with us. We have never yet felt the power of God's hand to smite and have come to think that it hardly matters how we live, since His grace is always available as a refuge in trouble. At all cost, let us clear from our minds this misconception; for according as is our attitude toward Him will be the display of His power toward us.

EZEKIEL vii. 27.

And they shall know that I am the Lord.

THIS is the objective of all God's disciplinary measures. He had set His heart upon the perfecting of His people in His fear and in true holiness ; and He takes the kindest way with them in order to secure this end. When they will not hearken to His gentler ministries, He visits them with sword and famine and captivity. But He never lightly afflicts them, nor suffers them to be humiliated without purpose. There is nothing haphazard in His ways, which have as their end the blessing of His chosen—the opening of their minds, the control of their hearts, and the sanctifying of their lives. Since they can come to know Him Whose knowledge is their true good in no other way than by means of the rod, He loves them too well to leave them unpunished.

It is as hard for us as for Israel to pierce love's dark disguises. We are apt to blind ourselves to the stern purposes of God, and to imagine that He cannot be the Author of our seeming calamities. Whereas, in fact, it is by the things we can least understand in themselves that we come to know Him. The design justifies every detail of life's ordering, even when it seems as though God had forgotten to be gracious in permitting disappointment, failure, sickness, loss to come upon us. Yet for many it is only in the school of affliction that our sensibilities are refined, until we both apprehend Him and that also for which He has apprehended us. And this is life eternal.

Though they cry in Mine ears with a loud voice, yet will I not hear them.

THUS does God summarize the moral lessons of the vision which Ezekiel had seen. The secret life alike of priests and people had been disclosed. The image of jealousy set up for worship, the chambers of imagery in which vile abominations found place, and the cult of those things which could only be worshipped by men whose backs were turned toward the Temple of the Lord, had been made clear to the prophet's sight. And, as he mused upon their meaning, this word of the Lord fell upon his ears like the sentence of judgment from Him that sat upon the Throne. Israel's sin had so far put the nation out of moral correspondence with Heaven that the prayer which coming calamity would inevitably evoke would be but as mockery, and must recoil upon those who should offer it.

Such is the Divine estimate of the terrible power of sin. It puts men out of sympathy with all the demands of righteousness, and hence out of reach of the ministries of grace. We can only understand the strength of its destruction by measuring the greatness of the Covenant which it disannuls. It is when sin is seen in its power to deprive men both of appreciation of God's promises and of all desire for His fellowship, that we really understand how hateful it is to Him. Nothing can exceed the breadth and depth of His assurances to the praying soul. A maintained attitude of wilful rejection and rebellion, however, nullifies them all. It is the crowning calamity of life that men may and do sin themselves out of ear-shot of the God of love.

EZEKIEL ix. 4.

Set a mark upon the foreheads of the men that sigh . . . for all the abominations that be done.

THE vision of the man with the inkhorn, whose mission it was to go through the city and to discriminate between the multitude which gave no heed to the Divine law and the individuals who, in their loyalty to God, bore some measure of the burden of the national sin, was both prophetic of the coming judgment and illustrative of the prophet's present work. All uncertainty as to God's righteousness must for ever be cleared from the minds of His people. In the day when He should punish the nation's sin, the few who had preserved integrity of heart and had not defiled their garments should be delivered. For the Lord ever knoweth them that are His. He is not unrighteous to forget their work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope. By the issues which his message raised, and the necessity for self-declaration in which it involved his hearers, Ezekiel was but helping to make visible before men what was never obscure before Heaven.

Is not this what the demand of every moral situation does? It brings out what is in men, and ranges them on either side of the eternal law of righteousness. It brings out into the open those whose secret faith is in the Most High, and whose hearts turn to Him as the compass-needle to the north. This is the value of the difficult moral circumstances in which many of us find ourselves day by day. They make concealment impossible and in so doing bless us immeasurably. And one day those who have been thus openly marked as Christ's followers, in this the day of His rejection, will have His Name eternally stamped on their foreheads in the Kingdom of His glory.

They went every one straight forward.

THE prophet is not left to any device of his own in regard to the character of his service. Awed by the constant appearing of the glory of God, so that he could never think meanly of his work, nor trifle with its requirements, he was instructed also in its nature by the visions granted to him. In none more clearly than in that of the cherubims in which was set forth the unswerving obedience to command, and the swift readiness of loyalty, in which alone God's work can be effectively carried out. The significance of the fact that these heavenly beings "turned not as they went," but pursued an undeflected course, taught him the value of steady continuance, and of the supremacy which the Divine command must ever take over every other impulse and interest, in those who truly would be His servants.

It is one of the devices of the evil one, to hinder the progress of God's work through His servants, that it is made easy and attractive to them to turn from the one thing which has been committed to their trust. This is, indeed, the secret of declension in spiritual power of many an earnest life. It has sacrificed direction for diffusion. It has done many things only moderately well instead of doing the supreme thing with unvarying fidelity. How cogent is the example and rebuke of the Face set steadfastly to go to Jerusalem, dissuaded in vain alike by friend and foe! We need to remember that it is the man who goes straight forward, whether life be for him a walk or a race, who wins to the goal.

That they may walk in My statutes, and keep Mine ordinances, and do them.

HOW rich and full are God's promises to the faithful remnant from amongst a rebellious people! He will bless them in exile with His own comradeship. He will recover them from nations which held them captive, and will re-establish them in their own land. Above all, He will give them a moral and spiritual renewal which shall inspire new conceptions and inspirations. And all to the end that they may walk in His ways, and be a people after His heart. The moral effect of their past discipline shall justify its severity, and the realized possibility of obedience shall attest the certainty of His Spirit's indwelling.

The Divine objective in all life's governed experiences is spiritual. We miss the larger meaning of life itself when we forget this. God has called us unto holiness which is active and not merely emotional; and unto righteousness which is energetic and not merely positional. Hence the purpose of His dealings with us, which we misread apart from this key which has been put into our hands by Christ. Everything He taught, by example and precept, was directed toward the creation of character—and consequent equipment for the high service of obedience—in His followers. How much of the Divine enduement we lose by misuse, applying to our own enjoyment what is intended to make us instruments and agents for the carrying out of His Will in the world! And how great is the failure of any Christian life which realizes everything else but this!

For I have set thee for a sign unto the house of Israel.

THE removal of Ezekiel's dwelling-place, which was to be carried out openly by day in the sight of the people, was a parable of Israel's captivity. It was intended to bring home to the people the great fact that their sin should not be unpunished, and that the cause of disaster so soon to overtake them was in themselves. They might look upon the prophet as being beside himself, yet could not fail to be impressed with the fact that he believed in the truth of the message he had received by revelation. His sanity they might doubt; his sincerity they could not question. And this was as God desired it. For Ezekiel was not only to be a spokesman to his generation but a sign also. In him they saw personified something, at least, of the ways of the Lord.

So in every age God has set forth His people as the attestation of His own work. In them, as in His Son, language becomes life, the Word is made flesh, and the glory of God dwells among men. "Ye are My witnesses," is a dominant refrain in Old and New Testament alike. The proof of a living Christ is a living Church made up of individual living believers. And it is as true to-day as ever, that the world takes its measure of Him from our representation. Each of us is set as a sign to our own day and generation. The important query for each is as to which way we are pointing men. For the responsibility of setting others a wrong course is altogether beyond measure. In the life of faith in the Son of God no man lives unto himself.

Woe unto the foolish prophets, that follow their own spirit, and have seen nothing!

THE work of God has always had imitators. When a prophet arose in Israel with a burning message of reproof or exhortation, of things present or things to come, there were ever others who for less worthy purposes simulated inspiration, and became his rivals. By means of toning down the asperities of his message they attracted people to themselves for their own profit. The circumstances of Ezekiel's day furnished a fruitful field for such; and it was part of his commission to warn blind people of the danger of following blind leaders. And, like Paul in later days, he did not hesitate to declare the sure judgment of Divine wrath upon those who made traffic in human souls by seducing them from His counsel. Sore, indeed, is the retribution which will fall upon the man who not only does despite to his own soul but involves the souls of others in the peril of false ways.

There is urgent warning here to all who desire in any way to be God's messengers. Unless they live in secret fellowship with Him, cultivating the open vision by personal obedience, and keeping free all the avenues of inspiration, they cannot avoid mistakes in motive and method which have the most far-reaching consequences. The danger, indeed, of speaking without first seeing, is one against which every Christian worker must guard. For, in the busy whirl in which most of us have to live, time for cultivating our necessary Heavenward relationship is apt to be crowded out. Let the eternal issues of unsanctified service be our warning.

That the house of Israel may go no more astray from Me.

PROPHET and people alike are involved in the national defection from God's law. Nor is it possible to interpret the messages of warning and rebuke which He sends as being anything less than the expression of a Divine care. It is not a matter of indifference to God that His people should fall short of His purpose. There is grief at the heart of all His judgments and wounded love in every declaration of sore discipline. It is because His heart is toward them, and He longs to realize His Will in them, that He is at pains to make them obedient. And always His honour is bound up with their highest well-being.

It is on the principle that the once-straying sheep loves the fold to which it is restored that the Divine discipline is exerted upon us. Anything that brings home to us the fact that our wanderings, whether wilful or unwitting, have consequences Godward as well as selfward, cannot fail to move us if we have any apprehension of the great love by which our reclamation is effected. It is the disclosure of the Divine passion which creates true penitence and inspires new purpose. This has always been the influence of Christ's Cross in the lives of men ; for there is seen not only the expiation of human guilt but the interpretation of sin's consequence. Where love and sorrow meet the new life is born, with its instinct of Home and its distaste for wandering. Like Israel, we are the sheep of His pasture for ever, when once we realize His affection.

Because they have committed a trespass, saith the Lord God.

EZEKIEL'S parable of the vine branch, and the impossibility of its use for any of the purposes in which wood is ordinarily used, is directed toward creating a consciousness in the people of their unfitness for the service of God. Though He has chosen them, and has given them opportunities without number, they have again and again proved unreliable; and now He is about to cast them off. There is nothing arbitrary or unreasonable in His action. Their destiny is self-determined. They have treated His law with contumacy, and have rebelled against the wholesome restrictions which He imposed upon them for their own benefit. He has trusted them, and they have repeatedly proved unworthy of confidence. Now they are to be dealt with as a workman would deal with unreliable timber.

The one pre-requisite for accomplishing the service of God, on the part of a nation or an individual, is simple obedience to His revealed Will. It is part of His grace that He leaves men in no uncertainty as to the things upon which His displeasure rests. His ways are marked out for us with unmistakable clearness. The hedges which bound the pathway of life are all planted by His hand, and are, in the highest sense, protective of His people. So long as we walk in His way He is able to do His good pleasure through us. When, however, we trespass in Bypath Meadow by first breaking down the hedge, we put ourselves out of the range of His favour. And He can only bring us back by the sharp discipline of pain. This is the lesson of life for nations and men, that God's purpose is sovereign and is never finally defied by human wilfulness.

Perfect through My comeliness, which I had put upon thee.

IN a story of peculiar tenderness is recounted the love of God toward Israel. He had taken her as an outcast infant, had nursed and nourished her, had enriched her with gifts, and made her life glad by the bestowal of wonderful privilege. Under the manifold ministries of His affection her life had developed in power and beauty, until its renown was a commonplace among all the nations. For it reflected His own nature which had been expressed in all these gifts. How bitter, then, is the Divine disappointment at Israel's unfaithfulness! Cords of love have not been strong enough to hold her to obligation. The pleasures of His House have not been satisfying enough to wean her from the false pleasures of sin. And it is in sorrow, rather than in anger, that He pronounces judgment upon her waywardness. For His own name is involved in the failure of His people to maintain faith and loyalty before a beholding world.

His gifts to Israel are prophetic of the grace which He has lavished upon His Church by Jesus Christ. All that He did for the nation has been multiplied a million times in the love which found its full and final expression only at Calvary. Now His children are clad in His righteousness, not only as a mark of acceptance but also for a witness to the world. Their faithfulness to this high responsibility, and the quality of their actual life before men, are of profoundest moment, not only to themselves but to the cause of His Kingdom.

EZEKIEL xvii. 24.

I the Lord have spoken and have done it.

THE riddle and parable of the two eagles and the vine was meant to foretell both judgment and mercy. Just as one eagle destroyed the life of the tree by plucking off the top of the young twigs, so would Israel be plucked up and carried away into captivity. This was the unvarying message of the prophet that God would deal drastically with the nation which dealt unfaithfully with Him. Just, however, as the tender twig planted by the eagle in a fruitful field became a spreading vine of "low stature," so in the land of captivity Israel should recover those qualities of faith and devotion which ought to characterize her as the people of God. And He would, in His own time, re-plant the nation "in the mountain of the height of Israel." Mercy should follow judgment, and the lessons of the captivity should become the enduement of experience for the life of all future days.

It is always difficult for men to recognize God as the Author of seeming calamity. We are all prone to take shortsighted views, and few can see beyond the chastening to the peaceable fruit of righteousness which it yields. Again and again we lose our way because we do not recognize the vital fact that God Himself orders all our ways as our attitude toward Him necessitates. For did we always believe this, we should not resent the change of circumstance, the disappointment of hope, the seeming handicap upon our powers, by which He seeks to bring us truly to Himself. We confidently await the morning if we are sure that the sun is not totally eclipsed.

Behold, all souls are Mine.

THE proverb of the fathers' sour grapes which had set the children's teeth on edge had become current in Israel, and was light-heartedly proffered as a justification of the moral condition of the land. Challenged by the prophet's stern call to amendment, this was the answer by which men silenced both his exhortation and their own conscience. They regarded themselves as being victims of heredity. The strange forces of the past held them in their grip, and they were what they were because their fathers had been what they had been. Human nature is always glad to snatch at any argument for irresponsibility, and in Israel's day, as in our own, this one was ready to hand. With what precision does Ezekiel dispose of such a contention. He declares that every man is in direct personal relationship with God, and sustains his own responsibility to His law.

When we lose the sense of personal obligation in regard to God's law the door is opened for all kinds of excuses. But try as we may, we can never escape the implicates of our creation and redemption. God has a claim upon us which can only be met by our fullest obedience. We are His by every Divine right, and if we flout His commandments we are personally involved in sin's penalty. Should not this truth—that we belong to Him—steady our impulses and save us from indifference and heedlessness? For His power is inescapable; and we only find our true life when we willingly relate ourselves to its laws.

EZEKIEL xix. 13.

And now she is planted in the wilderness, in a dry and thirsty ground.

EZEKIEL'S lamentation over Israel is part of his prophetic passion. He does not stand aloof from the life of the people as one who has no concern beyond the delivery of his message. He feels with and for them, and his heart is burdened with all their avoidable sorrows. His keen vision of the inwardness of present situations and future happenings only intensifies his pain ; for he loves his nation as he loves his God. To see her plucked up and cast out like a fruitless vine, causes him deep grief ; and in declaring what he sees it is with intent that the nation should recover herself and avert calamity by true repentance and return to God. For although removed from her own land she is to be planted in another, which will be as a wilderness and not as the fruitful hill in which God had at first placed her. The vine should live, but in no sense should it live abundantly, in Babylon.

It is good to know that even in dry and thirsty ground God can still nourish His people's life. Israel's vitality would soon have given out under the strain of captivity had it not been reinforced by Divine power. She had lost her hold upon God, but He had by no means lost His hold upon her. And thus, too, it is in our lives. Even when the wilderness experience is the direct outcome of our own unfaithfulness, He does not deny Himself, and can keep faith alive despite all the pain of righteous discipline. It is not in Israel alone that men are found who make amazing discovery of His unwearying love in a land of darkness and doubt.

Hallow My Sabbaths; and they shall be a sign between Me and you.

THE honouring of the Sabbath was from earliest days strongly emphasized by Israel's religious teachers. All the elaborate details in regard to its observance enjoined by Mosaic law had deep spiritual sanction; for each one was based upon God's concern alike for the well-being of His people and for the influence of their witness to other nations. The day of rest was needed for the nation's fullest development, which could only be secured then, as now, by giving adequate place to worship. The land also could only realize its proper fertility by periodical rest. But, above all, the other peoples, to whom Israel stood in the relationship of God's messenger, could only learn of His holiness and majesty by the open avowal of His rule in their conduct. Thus the weekly rest day, with its prohibitions and precepts, its negative and positive ordering, marked Israel out as a peculiar people and attested the reality of the Unseen.

Most of Israel's calamities came upon them in direct consequence of disregarding the ordinance of the Sabbath. For when faith declined, and worldliness invaded the nation's life, obedience declined also. Inward alienation of heart soon expressed itself in outward perversity, and direct disobedience brought its own consequence. Are we wiser to-day, when it has become conventional to look upon the Lord's Day as our own? For He is still the God of jealousy, just because He is the God of love.

Until He come Whose right it is; and I will give it Him.

THE dethronement of Israel's king gives opportunity for the announcement that One shall come Whose reign shall be righteous and Who shall rule in His own right. Every expedient of government has hitherto failed. The race of kings has become degenerate; the order of priests has not maintained fidelity to God; and the prophets have, speaking generally, entirely fallen short of their mission. The Divine patience is strained to the uttermost, and no longer shall Israel have opportunity of self-amendment. The nation is morally bankrupt, and all that remains is that she should reap the fruit of her own doings and realize the consequence of her defection from God. But it shall not always be so. Upon the darkness the bright light of promise shines, assuring the coming of Him Who, in the fulness of time, shall gather together in one Israel's scattered people.

Of wider application still is the prophet's vision. For, as with Israel, so with the course of things in this our own age. Established order is being overturned and schemes of reformation are all proving abortive. On every hand are signs that until Christ Himself comes to assume the government of His Kingdom things must go from bad to worse. Yet how clear and unmistakable is the promise of His Coming which runs like a refrain through the entire Word! Surely when we see disorder most general we do well to lift up our heads, knowing that our redemption draweth nigh.

Can thine heart endure, or can thine hands be strong, in the days that I shall deal with thee?

THE city of Jerusalem has been strong in wilfulness and pride. The inhabitants have not scrupled to defy God to His face in committing abominable lewdness, and in contradicting every claim that His righteous law has made upon them. They have interpreted His patience as tolerance of their evil ways, and have become rich and self-sufficient by the material gains of moral slackness. In the heyday of their prosperity God's challenge falls upon their ears. Do they think they will be able to endure His chastening, as He has endured their contumacy? Will the hands that have been strong to work evil courses be able to grapple with the circumstances of calamity which are soon to overtake them? Hitherto they have only known His favour. Henceforward they are to know His fury, and must suffer the penalty of their own ways. For all the deterioration of past days has made them weak indeed to meet the crisis of judgment.

Yet even God's warnings are blended with mercy. Although the people are to be punished, they have the promise of restoration to cheer and encourage them. The furnace shall only refine the dross; and when its work is done the precious metal shall once again be in the Lord's hand for His use. They may not understand all His ways; but they can at least cherish the hope of a happy issue, since they already have proof of His faithfulness. It is this that enables any man to endure—that he sees Him Who is invisible governing and directing life's every experience.

Ye shall bear the sins of your idols.

ONCE again, under the figure of idolatrous uncleanness, the prophet sets forth the nation's sin. Bound to God by every moral and righteous consideration, Israel had played the harlot, forsaking Him for other lovers, and revelling in her abominations. For His worship idols have been substituted, and the love which ought to have been His alone has been given to them. Instead of the innocency with which His altars should be compassed, all the vileness attendant upon idol-shrines has defiled the land. God is set forth as an outraged husband Whose honour has been dragged in the mire and Whose name has been degraded before the world by the unfaithfulness of His chosen. Remonstrance with her has proved ineffective. Now she must bear the full weight of her sins.

None can ever turn from covenanted relationship with God, giving any part of his strength to other lords, without courting spiritual disaster. Sooner or later every divergence of allegiance recoils upon the divided heart. For God is not mocked. Many a life to-day has lost its early brightness and its power of Christian influence because of the welcomed intrusion of something or some one. Some profitable pursuit or pleasurable habit, some alluring prospect or engrossing pleasure, has become an idol. For it is with us as with Israel—that anything which successfully contests the Lord's right in our lives, in any degree, incurs His displeasure and the forfeiture of His blessing. When the warning of His displeasure is disregarded, spiritual calamity most surely lies ahead.

So I spake unto the people in the morning: and at even my wife died; and I did in the morning as I was commanded.

HERE is a day in the life of the prophet. Forewarned by God of what was coming upon Israel, he set out in the morning to declare his message. In the evening the greatest sorrow of his life challenged his faith; for the desire of his eyes was taken from him with a stroke. But even this heavy blow and the greatness of his grief was not suffered to interfere with his mission. Dark and sorrow-laden as were the hours of night in which he mourned in secret, sharing his bereavement with none, he arose next morning intent on carrying out his mission; and, putting away all personal concern, he went on with his work because it was God's work. His is an unmatched example of devotion to the Will of God and of the supersession of every private interest by the urgency of the Lord's commission.

Divine grace does not obliterate human relationships but sanctifies them. Earthly ties are made not less strong but infinitely more tender by reason of the Heavenward bond. Yet so sovereign are the interests of the Kingdom that nothing can ever displace them in those who are Christ's pledged disciples. Never must personal considerations enter into competition with His call to service. Those who follow Him are never off duty; and so tremendous are the issues of their service that to yield to the claim of even the closest earthward relationship is disloyalty. This was His own pathway, along which He found unspeakable compensation. And it is to the following of His steps that His Evangel calls and equips us.

They shall know My vengeance, saith the Lord God.

LOOKING beyond Israel, Ezekiel sees those nations who have from time to time entered into her life and have affected her fortunes. Among them is Edom, whose relationship with Israel has again and again been marked by cruelty and oppression. Stronger than the people of God, the Edomites have treated them oppressively, imagining themselves immune from all consequence. For God has suffered them to act thus as a scourge to Israel's sins. At the same time, He has taken note of their violation of every law of humanity; and though He has not interfered to save Israel, He does not mean that Edom shall go unpunished. As they have acted against the house of Judah with vengeance so they shall know what vengeance means. For upon them and their land God will turn His hand. They shall yet learn that he who touches God's people touches the apple of His eye.

It would seem as though the Edomites had not been altogether without knowledge of God's laws. Otherwise, their punishment would not be according to justice. And it may be safely inferred that in this, as in all things else, God is not untrue to Himself. Edom is to know His vengeance because it will not know His grace. Thus, too, it is with individuals in our own, as in every age. The way of life and the way of death constantly challenge our choice; and by our attitude—not of theoretical belief but of practical energy—toward God, is our destiny determined. We settle for ourselves whether our future holds the goodness or the severity of God.

I will make thee a terror.

LIKE Edom, Tyre had involved herself in the Divine displeasure by her attitude of scorn toward Israel and Israel's God. And like Israel also she was to be brought low by the power of the king of Babylon, who, with his superior military forces, should invade and bring down the most prosperous of all the cities of her day. The graphic description of her calamities, and of the influence they should have upon the nations far and near with whom she traded, is the burden of Ezekiel's message. To these other nations her fall shall be a warning example that they who despise God shall be lightly esteemed.

God teaches men largely by the example of other men. Redeemed lives are His witnesses. It is not the word proclaimed, so much as the word incarnated, which brings home to our hearts the eternal truths by which alone we live. It is well, therefore, for us to learn the sureness of His ways from what we see of His dealings with others, and by comparison of our own experience with theirs. For it is thus that we are able to discern the great issues which proceed from small causes, and to avoid them. And we in turn become examples to others; which fact is one of the most serious of all considerations. If we really understand that those about us are forming impressions of God, which may make or mar their whole lives, from what they see of His power exerted in us, how careful we should be that we give no uncertain witness of Love which responds to faith, and of Grace which meets every human weakness and need.

EZEKIEL xxvii. 26.

Thy rowers have brought thee into great waters.

STILL vividly describing not only the calamities of Tyre but the causes also which have led to them, the prophet attributes her downfall to her actual prosperities. Her commerce has been carried on with every known nation. The luxuries of each have been imported in return for her products and have deteriorated the people, until Tyre has lost her soul. Her possessions have become her possessors. In her material gains have lodged the seeds of her moral destruction. Her successes have sapped her strength and assumed control of her destiny. Like rowers impelling a vessel they have urged her on until she is now past recovery. The whole world has been gained, but she has lost her own life.

What a picture is here of the folly of yielding to any but the highest influences, especially to those which promise great material prosperities. For under their spell men are apt to forget the price which must be paid for anything which does not come as the direct gift of God. The law of all life is the law of exchange. Nothing comes to us outside the Will of God except at great cost. To allow our course to be shaped by mere considerations of wealth, ease, comfort, and power, is soon to find that these things are the rowers, that we cannot control their power, and that we are in waters too swift for our navigation. Once masters of our souls we discover ourselves mastered. And only by the grace of Him Who walks the sea at midnight are any of us, in such case, saved from utter disaster.

Sanctified in them in the sight of the heathen.

WHEN judgment shall have been executed upon the nations which have been as thorns in the side of Israel, and when God's people themselves shall have learned the lessons for which they have been taken into captivity, the new day will dawn for them Ezekiel voices the hope, by which God Himself seems to be sustained in the chastisement of His people, that they shall be prepared for restoration to their own land and for the renewal of fellowship with Him. He looks forward to the birth of a new penitence, a new faith, and a new obedience, as the outcome of all their sufferings. They shall learn the futility of their idolatries and the constancy of His love. And they shall enthrone Him, not only in secret belief but in avowed loyalty, before their heathen captors. This is the joy which God has set before Himself ; and the ideal which Ezekiel, in His name, sets before Israel.

It is always so, that when the Lord gets His rightful place in the hearts of His people He can do great things for them and through them. We are never straitened in Him but in ourselves. Yet He cannot, consistently with His own nature, fulfil His promise on any terms save those of entire surrender and utter obedience. When He is sanctified—set apart upon the high throne of men's hearts—He cooperates with their every faith and purpose. Nor are there limits to His power. The first great thing for all of us is to make Him our King. Beyond that we need have no concern.

I will give thee the opening of the mouth in the midst of them.

THUS is the prophet encouraged in regard to his own ministry. It had hitherto involved him in opposition and brought him into personal danger. While some hearkened to him, the nation, as such, treated him not as a prophet of God but as a mere agitator. Now at length his reward was in sight. When the people should have learned, under the discipline of national suffering, to turn to God and to serve Him, the promise of restoration to their own land should be fulfilled. Then the prophet should be their acknowledged leader in the things of the Lord. God would give him favour and acceptance in their eyes, and he should speak without fear the messages he received from Him.

When it is recognized that God is entirely responsible for the service of His people, that is, not only for the message they must deliver but for the circumstances also in which it is delivered, new inspiration comes to them. For since He is infinitely more interested in the issues of their faithfulness than they themselves can be, it is not hard to believe that He arranges matters with a view to securing that its fullest outcome shall not miscarry. Thus the difficulties of any situation are banished, and the heart of the one who speaks in His Name is freed from fear. For when God gives commission to His people it is with fullest assurance of His presence throughout its fulfilment. When Christ bids His disciples "go into all the world and preach the Gospel," He also declares "and, lo, I am with you alway." Who can hesitate to obey His Word when He Himself is so near at hand?

For the day is near, even the day of the Lord is near, a cloudy day.

CONSCIOUSNESS that the time was short was a strong factor in Ezekiel's fearlessness. He was supported by the conviction that his words would soon receive complete justification. Israel, as well as the surrounding nations involved, would then know that a prophet of God had been in their midst, and that He had not left Himself without witness. The moral and spiritual result, especially in regard to Israel, was part of the prophet's inspiration. For he was a true patriot, and longed with passionate longing that his people should be brought back to Heaven's ways and Heaven's favour. He foresaw, however, that when the Divine judgments were unloosed, the day should be dark for all concerned. He knew well that the very unlikeliness of the instruments used must create obscurity and confusion in the minds of those most closely concerned. Hence he warns them.

We too are often in danger of making the same mistake as Ezekiel anticipated. For the day of the Lord is not always heralded by bright sunrise. Yet it has been the experience of His people in every age that darkness has yielded treasures which they never found in the light. When they have trusted that He was working for their good in storm as in calm, in poverty as in affluence, in disappointment as in joy, they have learned lessons which became their eternal enrichment. Let us not then be afraid of those dark days when the outlook tends rather to terrify than to reassure. For every day is the Day of the Lord to those who are His.

EZEKIEL xxxi. 17.

Under this shadow in the midst of the heathen.

WHILE its first reference is to the protection of God's people in their long exile amid heathen surroundings, the force of this word is by no means exhausted by it. For it is comprehensively descriptive of all who love and serve Him in the world. Just as Israel was preserved, the national unity safeguarded, and the deepest instincts of the people kept alive by the unseen ministry of Divine grace, so are the children of God still kept from the defiling and degrading forces which play about their lives. The shadow of Almighty power, cast by the sun of Almighty love, is their defence. This fact, and this alone, is the explanation of the persistence of Christian life in face of earth's oppositions. It is because He lives that we live also.

How much richer would life be if we always remembered His nearness. The blighting shadow of distress falls upon many a life to its undoing. The dark shadow of sorrow is never far from the pathway of any one. The chill shadow of death is constantly over us all. But how different from this is His shadow—the shadow of a Great Rock in a weary land! At His side there is safe shelter and sure refuge, coolness in heat, warmth in winter, and loving welcome for weary and distressed pilgrims at all times. We may live nearer to God than to our circumstances or our enemies, if we are prepared to fit ourselves for such holy companionship. It is by dwelling in the secret place of the Most High—in ever increasing obedience—that we qualify for abiding under the shadow of the Almighty.

They shall tremble at every moment, every man for his own life, in the day of thy fall.

EGYPT has for so long stood as a strong and victorious nation that her coming downfall will exercise tremendous influence upon all other peoples. Her riches have been the envy of all, and she has been looked upon as the national embodiment of prosperity and endurance. That such a nation should come under the force of Divine judgment could not fail to be a warning portent to every other people. If Egypt was not safe from the wrath of Israel's God, who then could hope to be secure? If her resources were insufficient to cope with His power, was it likely that any other should be able to escape Him? Thus the judgment of Egypt was designed to have moral consequences, not only in herself but in all who beheld her.

God is always teaching us through others. The lives of men, whether under His grace or under the power of sin, afford clear indication of the way of life we should take or the way of death we should avoid. Experience reinforces the plain statement of His Word; and many an one who will not heed its injunctions are arrested by the sight of His doings in the lives of others. Do not let us fail to profit by what is so plainly declared all around us, nor forget at the same time that we ourselves are, consciously or unconsciously, witnesses to others. If we always kept this in mind, should we not endeavour to make life a lens for the magnifying of His grace, and thus a means whereby others should come to know Him?

If the watchman see the sword come, and blow not the trumpet, and the people be not warned.

THE responsibility of standing between God and the world is unspeakably great. His watchman is one who has had, in his own personal life, experience of the power of His Word. He knows God for Himself, and realizes the certainty of His promises both in regard to the punishment of sin and the forgiveness of the penitent. He sees judgment coming as a swift sword of which others are altogether unconscious; and upon him rests the obligation of giving them warning. The limit of his responsibilities is, of course, fixed by his opportunity. The responsibility of those who hear his warning naturally begins where his ends. He cannot force their attitude; but he can set before them the sure way of Heaven's favour. And in so doing he delivers his own soul from blood-guiltiness.

None of us is free from the danger of taking spiritual obligation too lightly. If we are Christ's disciples at all there is committed to us "the word of reconciliation." We are put in trust with a Gospel which is intimately connected with the destinies of men. It is within our power to speak words which make an eternal difference to those who hear them; and upon our faithfulness may depend their solitary opportunity of realizing the only way of escape and life. And yet how often are we content with something much less passionate than the service of a true watchman. Surely, if we realized the eternal issues involved, we should never rest satisfied while unwarned souls remain. And all the more so since our opportunity is winged. It is gone with every passing day.

I will make them and the places round about My hill a blessing.

JUST where Israel has failed, God purposes to give them new opportunity. Originally they had been set in the midst of the nations in order to be His representatives and to attest the reality of His law and His love. By their sin and disobedience, however, they failed to do this, and so forfeited their privilege. Now, at length, God promises that the very task in which they formerly broke down shall again be entrusted to them. They had actually become a stumbling-block, for they had distorted rather than displayed the grace of God. How great then is that grace which permits them to recover themselves in this way, and to atone, in part at least, for the past.

From the very beginning of things God has purposed that His people should be the communicating means of His blessing to the world. He said to Abraham: "I will bless thee and make thee a blessing"; and upon that theme all His promises in subsequent ages are a variation. This is the meaning of the pains He takes in the perfecting of character. For the channel which is to convey His blessing to others must be clean. The instrument which is to sound forth His Evangel must be well tuned. The hands that proffer His gifts to others must be altogether controlled by His Spirit. It is thus that Christians are prepared to be a blessing in the world. How gladly acquiescent then should we be in all the processes by which He seeks to make us useable. By bearing in mind the mission of pain we shall cease to be resentful and shall welcome anything that fits us for accomplishing His Will.

Whereas the Lord was there.

ONCE again Ezekiel is testifying against Edom and is declaring the coming judgment of God upon the cruelty with which the Edomites had consistently treated Israel and Judah. Not only, however, are they to be visited for their actions toward them, but for their attitude also toward God. They have both denied and defied Him. In their pride they have declared the intention of annexing the territory of His people, as though He had no say in the matter. The history of Edom is inextricably bound up with that of Israel, and such knowledge of God's law as came to the Edomites in this way, along with such evidence of His power as they had time and again seen, was accounted to them for responsibility. For had they not known God in some degree their flouting of His authority would have had no moral significance.

Men are apt to be fighting against God when they least suspect it. In taking matters into their own hands, and resolutely sweeping out of the way anything that opposes their plans, they practically deny His right of government. This is the lesson taught in later days when clearer light had made His ways yet more fully understood. "Go to now, ye that say, To-day or to-morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain. . . . For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that." It is the peril of Edom in her day, and of ourselves in this present, that the way of self-will is always attractive—and always in opposition to God's way.

I will settle you after your old estates, and will do better unto you than at your beginnings.

THIS is the centre of Ezekiel's entire prophecy, surpassing all his other messages in the richness of promise it proclaims. The people, restored to their own land, are to enjoy prosperities far beyond anything they have known. Chiefly, however, the power of God is to be seen in their moral and spiritual transformation. Cleansed from the stain of old sin they are to be freed also from its chain. Challenged continually by the demands of His Law, they are to be as continually controlled and strengthened by His Spirit. And the glory of God, which has been almost eclipsed by their past doings, is to shine through them to all nations. Bound up with their spiritual renewal is unprecedented fertility of the land and hitherto unrealized riches. Thus does God encourage them to trust Him.

It is always God's way to lead His people from grace to grace, from strength to strength, from glory to glory. In the life to which He calls us, progress is always toward clearer light and greater fruitfulness. The blessing of past days is by no means the full measure of His purpose. To-morrow is always brighter and fuller than to-day. God always keeps His best wine to the last. In what surprising contrast is His method to our experience of sin and self-rule. There the best things come first. Fullest enjoyment is at the beginning. When its glamour dies away it is followed by gloom. But in the Christian life all is different. New surprises ever await us; nor hath eye seen all that is one day to be ours.

The hand of the Lord was upon me, and carried me out in the Spirit of the Lord.

IT is significant that to be under the control of God's hand does not always mean immediate brightness and gladness. The prophet, conscious of an unusual sense of His nearness, and realizing himself to be in a peculiar degree in the inspiration of the Spirit, is carried not to scenes of fertility but to a valley of death. He sees, not the working of new life in Israel, but the consequences of old sin. All around him are bones dead and dry. Truly a picture of hopelessness—a situation which can only be altered by a miracle. He sees things first of all just as they are. For the Spirit under Whose control his mind is moving is the Spirit of Truth ; and it is essential to the power of his message that he should be made fully aware of the futility of every human influence to alter matters.

To-day it is the same. Those who yield themselves to the guidance of His hand are inevitably taken not to easy but to difficult spheres of service. In the midst of a dead people they are charged with the message of life. And their faithfulness is rewarded as in Ezekiel's vision. They see the animating Spirit bringing life into dead souls. They behold living men leaving the tombs and becoming an army of the Lord. And they know it to be His doing and marvellous in their eyes. For this is the miracle of the new birth which ever attends the ministry of the faithful prophet.

Thus will I magnify Myself, and sanctify Myself.

IT is not strange that again and again the prophet is compelled to explain the things he declares. Otherwise the people could not fail to be mystified at those things which they already suffered, and those which were yet to come upon them. It seemed as though the nation would be crushed out of existence between the upper and nether millstones of calamity. And the spirit of the people might well have fainted within them. Ezekiel, however, constantly offers them a spiritual interpretation which encourages them to trust God, and justifies His methods by making His objective plain. For they are already aware of their own sin, and do not need to be convinced of the necessity of its abandonment. Conscience is always God's ally.

The unlikely ways in which His purpose of holiness is effected in His people is often a stumbling-block to them. We are all inclined to believe that ease and happiness ought to follow faith, and that those who earnestly seek to do His Will should be exempt from the commoner hardships of life. Whereas it is only by means of these very things that His Will can be realized. Sorrow and disappointment, loss and pain, are all instruments of His discipline. For they quicken perception and conscience as nothing else does, and thus lead us to complete enthronement of the Lord as our sufficiency and our glory. Let us not then shrink from the kindest method which Eternal Love can employ for our highest good.

Neither will I hide My face any more from them.

AGAIN the gloom is pierced by a bright shaft of light from Heaven. Amid all the mystery which makes Ezekiel's prophecy awesome, the promise is given that one day the inexplicable shall be interpreted. God's face has been hidden from eyes blinded by sin. His disfavour has been shown toward a rebellious and faithless generation. But in the restoration all mystery and darkness shall be at an end. Eyes cleansed from sin-film shall be able to recognize His doings, and hearts freed from corruption shall rejoice in them. That day dawned for Israel and for all nations when the angels sang "Peace on earth, good-will toward men."

Christ, the express image of His person, set all questioning hearts at rest by declaring "He that hath seen Me, hath seen the Father." It is in Him that the light which dispels all darkness is focussed, and through Him that it radiates. How heartening to know that when we lapse into sin by carelessness or wilfulness, we may turn in penitence and prayer to find Divine love still beaming forgiveness upon us! How encouraging that when sorrow beclouds life, and things hard to understand are forced upon us by Divine providence, we may turn to find their interpretation in an unveiled Face that was once marred for us! And how stimulating to feeble endeavour to be assured that the light of His presence by which we now live, will one day be the glory of the new Heaven and the new Earth!

Declare all that thou seest to the house of Israel.

NO man who presumes to speak in God's Name can frame his own message. If he attempts to do so, it will certainly fail both of acceptance and effectiveness in those to whom it is spoken. Only that which he has seen in his solitary fellowship with the Lord, that upon which he meditates until it grips his own soul and becomes a very passion, and that also of which he has found the interpretation in the character of God Himself, can ever be a word of life in his lips. It is the authentication of every true prophet that he entirely disclaims originality. What he says, he says because he must. His eyes have seen a great light, and he cannot refrain himself from declaring both its source and its revelation to those that are in darkness. So it is that Israel comes to see God in the world because Ezekiel has seen him in the Sanctuary.

At the beginning of His ministry Christ called twelve men "that they might be with Him, and that He might send them forth"; first for careful observation of His ways and then for proclamation of His truth. First the solitariness of fellowship with His life and then the dangers and hardships of Gospel ministry. And herein lay the secret of their success. They were eye-witnesses of His Majesty. They could not but speak the things which they had heard, which they had seen with their eyes, which they had looked upon, and their hands had handled, of the Word of Life. Here, too, is our responsibility and our glory. We are to declare what we see. But we must first see what we declare.

EZEKIEL xli. 23.

And the temple and the sanctuary had two doors.

THIS disclosure of the Divine architecture of the Temple one day to be rebuilt, was designed to foster the faith of the people who did not yet see its foundations laid. The very fact that every small detail was already thought out, could not but encourage them to believe in the certainty of that restoration to their own land which the prophet proclaimed. Since God had already given the plan upon which His House was to be erected and ordered, they cannot but believe that He will take them back to Jerusalem to carry out His design. With such a hope as this to spur them, how could they come short in earnest co-operation with His purpose of their moral preparation for the task?

Nothing in any part of the sacred building was left to imagination or chance. While it is impossible to understand the significance of every ordinance in this respect, it is not difficult to see what the two doors of the sanctuary may well stand for. One surely suggested entry into the presence of God. Across its threshold lay the mystery of His love and power. The other led out into the sphere of service for every worshipper. Of Himself, Christ the great Anti-type said: "By Me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out." It is good to know that He both secures our acceptance with God and sanctifies our life among men. And we fall short of the Divine meaning of our redemption if we are betrayed into selfish appropriation of the blessing of "going in" while ignoring the obligation of "going out."

To make a separation between the sanctuary and the profane place.

THE clearly-marked line of demarcation between the holy place, to which entry was proscribed to all except the priests, and the open court of the temple where all might walk unhindered, was enjoined as part of the Divine direction for rebuilding in order to impress the fact of God's holiness upon His people. He could not be approached by the ceremonially unclean. Access to His presence was only possible on the ground of sacrifice and by mediation. Hence the outward symbols of His abiding presence in the midst of His people were to be carefully guarded. They stood for holiness so dazzling, and power so unmeasured, that they must always be invested with sacred and saving awe. To esteem them lightly is to esteem Him lightly.

All this must be reflected in the lives of God's people. They must observe complete separation in spirit, and purpose, and aim, from the present evil world. For they are children of the Sanctuary. While the world seeks its own, they seek the glory of God. While the world obeys no law but that of its own pleasure, they serve the Lord Christ. Thus the witness of their lives is in entire contrast to the spirit of those who do not recognize Him. "Not of the world," He has nevertheless sent them into the world; and their lives there should be distinguished by fragrance of the Holy Place from out which they have come. When this has been so, and the Church has been really unworldly in fulfilment of its high calling, it has always been His instrument for the blessing of men.

Let them measure the pattern.

IN order to evoke repentance and to inspire sincere confession and amendment, Ezekiel was charged to show to Israel the Divine ideal of a God-governed nation. Under the figure of a house filled with the glory of God they were to see what His indwelling presence really meant and were to compare their actual lives with this pattern. Every dimension given with such scrupulous care carried thus a moral value, enabling each individual to estimate his own part in the national responsibility and to effect his own share also in the national renewal of faith. Whatever conflicted with the purpose of holiness, and of entire and active surrender to the Divine government, had to be resolutely put away. Quickened faith must be energetic in this direction. Hence the prophet's presentation of God's requirement in a form which could not be mistaken.

This, too, is the method of the Christian life. God has finally expressed His purpose for His people in Jesus Christ. His is the ideal life upon which theirs is to be fashioned. He is the pattern of an earthly temple filled with the glory of God ; and we are called to become like Him. How necessary is it then to measure the pattern ; for we cannot otherwise know our own shortcomings. Nor can we estimate the possibilities of moral and spiritual attainment except as they are declared in Him. We are to walk " even as He walked," and must therefore follow His steps. " As He is," so are we to be in the world, and therefore, in detail, as well as in general design, life must be carefully compared and corrected by the Divine standard. Herein is the end of all self-satisfaction, carelessness, and lethargy. And herein is the beginning of true holiness.

Ye shall give them no possession in Israel: I am their possession.

THIS is a renewal of the Divine ordinance concerning the priesthood declared under Moses and Aaron. Those who ministered in the Sanctuary were to be entirely separate from the nation, not only by ceremonial observance but in actual quality of life. While it was lawful for other men to hold possessions, to amass riches, and to engage in secular pursuits to this end, the priestly tribe was entirely forbidden these things. Their privilege of standing between God and the nation, as His intermediaries, involved sacrificial obligation. Their service could only be worthily rendered at real cost to themselves. But what they lost by voluntary renunciation of ordinary citizen rights they gained in spiritual compensations. God Himself made up to them, in the joys of His service and in moral enrichment, for all that they must needs renounce.

Christ taught His followers the timeless interpretation of this Hebrew enactment. For they are made priests unto God, and can only fulfil their calling by sincere and unaffected detachment from the world. They must sit lightly to earthly possessions—which so often become enslavements, and must concentrate their fullest powers upon their supreme task. Thus, free of spirit and delivered from the snare of secular absorptions, they are at His disposal for whatever service He appoints. And in so living they come to know Him and to fathom the riches of His grace as otherwise were impossible. It is unto them that believe—after this sort—that He is precious.

Ye shall have just balances, and a just ephah, and a just bath.

IN anticipation of the reinstatement of the people in their own land Ezekiel proclaims the Law of God in its many-sidedness. For only under its ordinances can their national life be once more built up. So it is that he deals with their social and commercial relationships. They are to be true and just in their dealings one with another. The rich are not to oppress the poor nor the powerful to take advantage of the weak. Social justice is to be an expression of religious faith. Their worship toward God is to give ethical quality to their conduct toward each other. Rapacity was one of their old failings; and this ordinance regarding weights and measures is to guard them against again becoming its victims.

The old lesson that a close walk with God needs a careful walk with men has to be relearned in every age. For even good people forget that faith which is unattested by appropriate works is dead. The influence which lives exert each upon the other is never a matter of uncertainty; for what a man *is* somehow gets itself expressed in spite of himself. Conduct is always the voice of character; and it is by our conduct that we either attest or degrade the faith we profess, with consequences of good or evil beyond all measure upon the community. Scrupulous honesty, and unselfish regard for the interest of others with whom our lives are linked, form a vital part of Christian witness.

The lamb, and the meat offering, and the oil, every morning.

WHEN the Temple is rebuilt and its worship resumed, careful regard is to be had to the ordering of sacrifice and offering as enjoined from the earliest times upon Israel. Part of the cause of their downfall and captivity had been that the altar had been degraded and fellowship with Heaven thereby interfered with. Priests and people alike had fallen away from God, each reacting upon the other in respect of their attitude toward the really central things of national life. For the true centre of the kingdom was not the throne but the Temple. It is on this account that the prophet gives such prominence in his message regarding the reconstruction to the place God must have in their affairs.

There is a spiritual significance of this threefold ordinance which extends far beyond the limits of Israel's life. For obviously the lamb stands for the Great Sacrifice by which the sin of the world is taken away ; the meat offering for the consecration of God's people unto Himself, which is their reasonable service ; and the oil for the anointing of the Holy Spirit, by which alone power for the doing of the Divine Will is realized. In regard to these, each day must see a renewal of faith on the part of every one of us. For sin, conscious and unconscious, must be cleansed. Life's fullest loyalty must daily be directed anew upon its greatest issue. And fresh grace of the Spirit must be received constantly. Otherwise failure is inevitable.

EZEKIEL xlvii. 9.

Every thing shall live whither the river cometh.

THIS vision of the river, ever increasing in depth and volume, was designed to confirm the faith of prophet and people alike in the coming unprecedented fertility of their land. God's grace should be to them as a stream, which, flowing through barren places, would transform the wilderness into a garden and make waste places into fruitful fields. They should lack nothing, seeing that He would minister to them in ever-increasing fulness, according to their conscious need. Prosperity should not wane since the river should never exhaust itself. Their entire future was assured since God Himself was in their midst.

It is impossible not to connect Ezekiel's words with those which Christ spoke under the same figure. For He promised that His followers should first find in Him the satisfaction of their own needs, and then themselves become channels of the living water. Thus the influence of their lives should be life-giving. And this is His unaltered ideal—that wherever His people go they are to communicate life. What a prospect does this open up to all who have to live in barren places! If we but maintain our communion with Him, carefully keeping both ends of the channel open—that is, to receive His grace and then to let it flow out—the miracle of life shall be wrought. There is not one who may not thus be made a blessing if he will. What Jesus once said on the last day of a Jewish feast He says to His followers every day of their lives: "He that believeth on Me, as the Scripture saith, out of him shall flow rivers of living water." And this He speaks of the Spirit.

The name of the city from that day shall be, The Lord is there.

THE last words of Ezekiel's prophecy are as a crown upon the whole. The rebuilt Jerusalem, with the Temple as its centre, and the life of its people closely related to the worship and service of God, is to be a witness to the whole world. So entirely shall its defences be recognized as His power, and its glory as His presence, that its very existence shall testify to His majesty. For all men knew what it had formerly become, and why. The judgments it had suffered were not secret, nor their causes obscure. In its destruction, and now in its restoration, God shall have vindicated the righteousness of His law and the holiness of His nature. And while His people trust Him, and own His government, such an object-lesson shall bring wholesome fear and awe upon the other nations. The city itself shall become an Evangel and its prosperities an invitation.

All this illustrates the meaning and purpose of God's dealings with His people in every age. His discipline is directed toward making them worthy representatives of His Kingdom; and when, in realization of this, they give themselves entirely to Him, this is the glory He sets upon them. What an honour that He should be seen of others in their lives, and that the work of redemption should in this way be carried on through them! For when Jerusalem is thus renewed the world is enlightened. When the new Heaven comes down the new earth is created.

But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself.

HERE is the secret of the altogether wonderful and outstanding life of Daniel, lived amid the unfavourable influences of the court of Babylon. His position was such that it would have been easy for him to comply with an order which expressed royal favour. Others were doing it ; and it seemed as though the pathway of influence was opening both to him and to them thus easily. It was truly a brave decision which Daniel made, and one which confirms the reality of his secret faith. He had come to regard himself as under pledge to God, and his life as being already forsworn to His service. And in deciding thus to refuse the king's favours, although it looked like cutting himself off from all prospect of success, he was actually securing infinitely greater influence than easy-going acceptance could ever have brought him. His decision was far-reaching beyond anything he knew ; for God always honours the man who honours Him.

Temptation to compromise is never far from any one of us. Few men care to stand alone, especially on what seem to be matters of trivial importance. Yet only by preserving independence can we ever preserve integrity. And it is always little things that test us in this respect. He who will be single-minded will often have to be single-handed. But close to his side stands One Who Himself stood alone, and Whose companionship is sufficient to make effective the purpose He inspires.

He knoweth what is in the darkness.

DANIEL'S confidence in God was the secret of his clear vision. For mystery, however dark, loses its awe to the man who knows that He holds the key. Thus the challenge of the king's dreams did not affright him ; nor did the Lord fail His servant in a situation fraught with critical issues. It is to be noted that Daniel entertained no illusions as to his own abilities. If the dream is to be interpreted it can only be as God makes it plain to him. He knows that the darkness which blinds His people is as the noonday to Him Who dwelleth in light to which no man can approach. What is mystery to men is history with Him.

Darkness may well stand as a type of the unworthy, the unknown, and the unfathomable in human life. In interpreting it thus, how full of comfort and steadying assurance is the truth that nothing in these realms is beyond the range of His knowledge and hence of His care ! The hidden sins of which conscience is ashamed and afraid, are all known to Him. He knows, too, all that combination of circumstance and weakness which led to them. And hence His judgment is sympathetic and is at all times allied with offers of pardon and restoration. The things which perplex us and rob our peace by their very uncertainty, are all within the circle of His protecting foreknowledge. And He is ever leading those who will follow Him, out of their darkness into His own marvellous light. How safe it is to go with such a Guide !

DANIEL iii. 25.

And the form of the fourth is like the Son of God.

WHEN the children of God are faithful to Him, even though their faithfulness involves them in suffering, the power of their witness is enhanced beyond all measure. The three men cast into the fire in punishment for their obedience to a higher law than that of Nebuchadnezzar, found their bonds loosed and the terror of their plight actually cancelled by an altogether new fellowship with the Lord Himself. For He came and walked with them in the furnace, identifying Himself with their suffering for His sake, and identifying them also with Himself before the eyes of all who beheld them. From that day forward it was impossible for any in Babylon to mistake these men for anything other than men of God.

So it is still when men refuse allegiance to the gods of this world, and are in consequence made to pass through fires of hatred and opposition. If they are really in the fire for God then they are in it with Him. All that the flame can do is to burn up their bonds and to burnish their lives with the reflected light of His countenance. By their very bearing under the fierce test even the men whose hands pile fuel on the fire cannot fail to recognize the Lord with them. To every man's conscience they commend themselves in the sight of God. And is not this compensation enough for all their suffering? Alas, how many fail before such tests, and, taking an easier path to avoid the furnace, lose the greatest glory that life holds!

I . . . lifted up mine eyes unto Heaven, and mine understanding returned unto me.

THE story of Nebuchadnezzar's exile and restoration is the Old Testament anticipation of Christ's parable of the Prodigal. Lifted up with pride, and setting himself, as he thought, beyond the reach of God's arm, he suddenly found himself deposed and driven forth to make his dwelling with the beasts of the field. Such were his privations that his reason left him and he became actually bestial. Then, brought as low as could be, with pride humbled in the dust, he turned to God; and He Who had cast him down once again exalted him. Thus vividly did God speak to the nation through its ruler, and to his successors for all time, enjoining upon them true humility before Him by Whom alone kings rule worthily and common men live.

Nebuchadnezzar's reason came again to him when he lifted up his eyes to Heaven; and herein is illustration of a governing principle of life. As all light comes from the sun so all true wisdom comes from above. Many an one makes fatal mistake, with consequence far beyond his control, by failing to lift his eyes to Heaven when having to make the inevitable choices of which life is full. For there is a wisdom which is not from Heaven—"earthly, sensual, devilish." And when men's minds are controlled by its standards disaster is inevitable. Why should we ever be content with less than the highest, since He has promised to give wisdom liberally to them that ask? Let us turn our eyes to Heaven if we would have good understanding concerning things of eternal moment—as are all our duties and doings.

DANIEL v. 22.

Though thou knewest all this.

PART of the Divine indictment against Belshazzar was that he had not profited by the experience of Nebuchadnezzar, his predecessor. So striking had been God's dealing with him, that it seemed impossible that any other king should run the risk of offending Him. Yet the heart of man is so proud of its independence that the new king despised the lessons of the past, and went even further in the way of contumacy and pride than Nebuchadnezzar had gone. He flouted God to His face and challenged His wrath by licentious idolatry and blasphemous sacrilege. And thereby he lost his kingdom. For no man, whoever he be, can with impunity play fast and loose with His declared Will.

To be untrue to knowledge is the beginning of all defection. To act as though God had never spoken, and as though we had never heard His voice, is simply to court disaster. Every increase of intelligent apprehension regarding Divine requirement means increased responsibility. It is the servant who knows his lord's will, and does it not, who is beaten with many stripes. Every day is a judgment-day, when we are weighed in invisible balances—our attainments measured by our opportunities, and our obedience tested by our privilege. And herein is the irony of the situation: that the Divine justice can never be called in question. Because we have known His demands we are utterly speechless when His condemnation is declared.

His windows being opened in his chamber toward Jerusalem.

THIS was no mere act of bravado on Daniel's part, but simply the maintenance of a habit which had become part of his life. Exiled from his native land, his heart naturally turned thitherward to the home of his fathers and to the temple of his God. Day by day he kept the lamp of hope burning by thus feeding its flame. The thought of what was one day to be, and the prayer that he might have some share in bringing it about, helped to keep him free from contamination with the evils of Babylon. It lifted his soul above the sordid levels of the men around him, and both strengthened and directed his energies. Moreover, it helped toward keeping his life sweet amid most unhelpful circumstances, to have constantly before him the thought of all that Jerusalem stood for in the past favour and future purpose of God.

Nothing ever does for men what a great ideal accomplishes. Recognizing ourselves as bearing a vital part in the great work of Christ's Kingdom—the work of making Him known unto the uttermost parts of the earth, of building a spiritual temple, and of thus hastening His Coming—we are saved from all the littleness that mars so much professed Christian life in our own day. For we cannot but emulate Daniel if the fact of God's confidence in us really grips us. And like him, we shall descend from the open window to take up the challenge of life with renewed strength. Of course, we may never see the objective realization of our ideal; but we shall realize that its subjective force makes us men of increasing purpose—that is, followers of the Lord Christ.

But I kept the matter in my heart.

THE vision which Daniel saw was beyond his power of immediate apprehension. Its imagery both awed and thrilled him, for he knew that it declared some vital message from God to His people, some unfolding of the future to stimulate their faith and to guide their activities. It overmastered his mind by its immensity, and humbled him before God by quickening a sense of his own littleness. But while he could not at all fathom its meaning, and though it burdened his mind, he nevertheless kept the matter in his heart ; because he knew that God had spoken to him. He could not reason the matter out even with Him. But he could, and would, and did trust Him for its elucidation in due time. Meanwhile, as ever, he was at His disposal for service.

In the nature of the case the thoughts of the Infinite are beyond the minds of His finite creatures. We can at best only know in part and prophesy in part. There are some things He says, both in His Word and in His providences, which will test our patience until we see His face. Indeed, the hall-mark of mystery is invariably stamped upon the Divine Word. Yet while we wait in the certainty that one day " we shall know even as we are known," and as we watch the unfolding of purposes greater than we can apprehend, we must keep the matter in our hearts. Faith refuses steadily to dethrone the King at the mad demand of the puzzled mind. In this way the peace that passes understanding becomes the greatest of all realities to us.

Afterward I rose up, and did the king's business.

ONCE again Daniel is bowed under the weight of all which the mysterious vision of God's purposes brings. It is as though he is utterly lost amid the immensity of the things declared and hinted at. For the Ages are made to pass before him, and the wonder of God's control forces him to a realization of that Eternal love, which, amid these stupendous undertakings, can yet stoop to care for the individual lives of His children. The revelation prostrated him; so keenly did he feel the sheer loneliness of the position in which it placed him. For he could share its secrets with none, nor take counsel as to their meaning. It is tribute to his splendid faith, that, recovering somewhat from the first shock of this experience, the claim of duty did not assert itself in vain. He arose and did the king's business.

It is in this way that Christian men in every age commend that for which they stand. Too often we allow spiritual experience to dull our response to the rightful demands which others make upon us. Vision and duty are far too frequently things apart, when they should be closely interrelated. For if our sense of God, of the greatness of His power and the sweetness of His love, does not make us the more efficient servants of men in our daily calling, we have utterly misconceived the purpose of the revelation. No one is likely to give any weight to the testimony concerning Eternal realities, of that Christian who, in his temporal duties, is slack and undependable. If we fail in all things else, do not let us fail in rising from our deepest emotional experience to do "the king's business." Otherwise Christ's glory suffers.

DANIEL ix. 5.

We have sinned, and have committed iniquity, and have done wickedly, and have rebelled.

THE true prophet stands both remote from the people and identified also closely with them. He does not merely seek to point out their faults and to preach repentance; but, recognizing himself as one with them in national life, he openly takes upon him a personal share in their guilt. Thus it is that Daniel confesses on his own behalf, as on that of the nation, apostasy from God, although he had himself courageously sought to walk in His ways. In this he came closest to those whom he would lead, and induced them to go with him to the Throne of Grace. He recognized that general shortcoming had frustrated God's purpose for the nation, and that only as His people jointly returned to Him could there be anything like national restoration.

The ministry of intercession is one to which all believers are called; but it cannot be rightly exercised until the weight and burden of sin is really felt. The saving salt of any people is the presence in their midst of those who know how to approach God as did Daniel, and as have all Christ's true followers in every age. For He is both our example and inspiration in this as in all things else. Himself bowed down with the terrible weight of the world's iniquity He made intercession for the transgressors, and still pleads His own sacrifice on their behalf as our great High Priest passed into the Heavens. In union with Him, we, too, cannot fulfil our lives apart from the service of prayer. But we must not alienate those or whom we pray by any show of aloofness from their concerns.

From the first day that thou didst set thine heart to understand . . . thy words were heard.

HUMBLED under a sense of the sin of the nation, which he had taken upon himself in confession to God, Daniel is humbled yet more by the vision of His glory which follows upon his intercession. He is awed alike at the sight of God's majesty and at as much of its import as he can apprehend. For no man can realize the presence of God, nor read aright of the disclosure of His Will concerning the course of the world, without realizing his own littleness and without being inspired to reverence. To such an attitude God ever responds by coming yet closer and speaking yet more plainly.

The assurance He gave to the prophet that from the beginning his prayer had been heard, and that he had been chosen as a messenger to His people, is full of encouragement alike to him and to us. It declares that although God's ways may sometimes seem to be slow and His methods circuitous, in reality they are entirely direct. Many a time we pray, and are prone to interpret God's silence as a denial of our petitions. Whereas, in truth, He only defers their fulfilment until such time as we ourselves are ready to co-operate to the full in His purposes. Prayer registered in Heaven is prayer dealt with, although the vision still tarries. And faith is trained to its supreme mission under the discipline of patience. The man who can wait God's time, knowing that He edits his prayer in wisdom and affection, will always discover that He never comes to his aid one minute too soon or too late.

The people that do know their God shall be strong, and do exploits.

THUS is Daniel encouraged amid all that is foretold of coming calamity. For, even among those in whom sin calls for condign judgment, there are a few whose faith in God shall not waver and whose loyalty shall not vary. Knowing Him by personal experience they shall not be beguiled into following the multitude to do evil; and, in consequence, they shall become the instrument with which the Divine victory shall be achieved. Nor can the measure of their influence be estimated. For in the hand of the Almighty Power weakness becomes strength, and the unlikeliest are made effective to the pulling down of strongholds.

Really to know God men must give themselves whole-heartedly to His Word and to the guidance of His Spirit therein. We may know about Him from the testimony of others and from the historic records of His doings. But the knowledge that is power can be acquired in no other way than by personal diligence and obedience. Its evidence is twofold—in the realm of character and of action. It transforms men increasingly after the Divine ideal, and endues them unto the carrying out of otherwise impossible service. But the order is to be carefully noted. It is first, they "shall be," and then, they "shall do." For it is the being that gives quality to the doing. Herein is the true knowledge of God distinguished from whatever is false.

Thou shalt rest, and stand in thy lot at the end of the days.

THESE, the last of the recorded words of God to Daniel, are at once a promise and a seal of Divine approval upon his conduct. He has had to face many difficult things, and has had to count not his own life dear unto himself in carrying out his commission. He has been charged with vision and message which alike have burdened his spirit and isolated him from the fellowship of other men. He has been tested in almost every realm of human interest, and has not been found wanting. And now, at the end of his recorded service, God sets the crown of His approval upon His servant in this promise—that he shall not be moved, nor himself suffer any of the calamities that are yet to come upon his race.

It is always easier to withstand in the evil day than "having done all to stand." There follows closely upon spiritual activity and accomplishment the test of reaction, when body and brain are over-tired and readily responsive to evil suggestion. Then only those who live, not upon the excitement of service but in fellowship with the Lord Himself, can escape its perils. How little do we imagine that every day we live we are preparing for critical issues, and are thereby assuring to ourselves continuance of that ministry of Divine Grace by which alone we can face them worthily—or are cutting ourselves off from it. Let us remember that continuance is the ultimate test of reality, and train ourselves accordingly. For the Crown of Life is promised to him "that endureth"—even as He endured.

The beginning of the word of the Lord by Hosea.

NOTHING could be more inexplicable to Hosea than the first command which launched him upon the prophetic life. For, in order to be as a sign to the people, he must needs take a wife of an unfaithful spirit, in the full consciousness of what this must inevitably bring about of domestic infelicity. That he does so without question, is strong evidence of his hidden life of devotion and communion with God in the earlier days. How else could he have given such unhesitating obedience to a word which any man might well have failed to understand? But "the Lord knoweth them that are His;" and in choosing Hosea He knew well that he would not fail Him. Only by the obedience of such an one could Israel's religious harlotry be brought home to the conscience of the people; and only so could the love of God be appreciated in its length and depth and height.

The true servant of God must at all times be willing not only to be a speaker but a sign also. He must be prepared to exemplify in his own conduct and experience something, at least, of the suffering and the character of Him Whom he represents. He must be willing, too, to be misunderstood by others, and to live without the stimulus of popular approval. This, of course, involves entire self-sacrifice and the renunciation of many things that men hold dear. And, in order, that his heart may be kept tender and his spirit unembittered, he must be careful above all things to cultivate unbroken comradeship with the Lord. For it is in the power of His Spirit alone that such a life can be worthily lived.

I will even betroth thee unto me in faithfulness: and thou shalt know the Lord.

UPON the dark picture of Israel's unfaithfulness, her idolatries, and lewdness, the bright light of the love of God shines. Himself the Author of the discipline by which, as an erring wife, she is brought to painful self-knowledge, He is planning all the time to bring her back to His love. By disappointment and disillusionment, by the loss of her lovers and the destruction of her hopes, He seeks to draw her back to the ways of virtue. Despite everything He is willing to accept her discredited professions and to reinstate her in the fellowship which her waywardness has outraged. Can Divine love go further than this in its effort to save His people from themselves?

It is the everlastingness of God's love which sets it as a thing apart from every other influence to which the human heart can make response. The sheer wonder of the fact that He still desires to make us His own, when we have forfeited all claim upon Him by our wilfulness, makes it finally impossible to trample His affection under foot. And the certainty that if we have discovered our utter weakness as well as our sinfulness, our unreliability as well as our deepest needs, He will hold us for ever in a grip which nothing can loosen, cannot but inspire our return to Him with shamefaced joy. And coming we shall not be disappointed of our hope. The place of defeat shall become the place of victory. Where we have failed to apprehend Him we shall be quickened to unfailing recognition of His love which will not let us go.

Without a king, and without a prince, and without a sacrifice.

WHAT a picture of national ruin is here presented. Every distinguishing sign of order and well-being is taken away from a backsliding people. Yet it is by these very deprivations that Israel is to be brought to penitence. For the love of God must often take unkindly forms in order to accomplish its beneficent purposes. Only by being shorn of all her former glory can unspeakable sin be brought home to the nation. Her national life being broken up by the removal of the throne, and her religious life likewise by the removal of the altar, Israel had lost all that bound her peoples together. And she is still in this state. Never since Hosea's day has she had either king, or prince, or sacrifice. Nor will she, until she turns once again to seek the Lord her God.

How many Christians have really come to know the Lord, in the first instance, by the things He has taken from them! Not that He willingly afflicts them for His own pleasure, but perforce for their profit. When even lawful things become causes of pride and self-will they must be broken if we are to be saved. This is the interpretation of many an apparently hard providence and unkindly circumtance. He knows that some of us would never reach Heaven at all if pain did not at first bring us to His feet. And few of us can look out upon life's retrospect without thankfulness for the things that have been taken from us. For we see now, as we could not at the time, that He came Himself to fill the vacant places in our hearts.

Ephraim is joined to idols: let him alone.

IT would almost seem as though there are some of whom God Himself despairs. Unmindful of His commandments, and paying no heed to His warnings, they strengthen themselves in their own ways and set up their pride against His righteous demands. Such an attitude all unconsciously tends to harden into an unalterable state, in which the ear is heavy and the heart unresponsive to all further messages from Heaven. Such, indeed, was the state of Ephraim. Seduced from allegiance to God by the fascination of heathen idol-worship, and unwilling to return to Him as again and again He urged in varying message, the people had become entirely wedded to their sin. Their hearts were finally given to that which was a sheer contradiction of the thing for which the worship of God stood; and they had literally lost power of response. For they had destroyed in themselves all taste for the pure, the holy, and the true.

This is the fatal fascination of sin—that it tends to become despotic. Its cords, silken at first, become like steel bands if they are tolerated. Its deadly love numbs the capacity of the soul for higher things; until ultimately every thought is vitiated, every desire controlled, and every moral energy sapped. In such a state the ordinary ministry of grace is utterly without appeal, for it is without point of contact with a life so dominated and satisfied. Nothing but sheer catastrophe serves to arouse such. And in His love God most often plans this.

I will go and return to My place, till they acknowledge their offence, and seek My face.

BY withdrawal of the gifts of His presence from His people God sought to kindle in them a desire to seek Him. When they realized their loss, and awoke to the fact that they had grieved Him away, they would surely set every other interest aside, and, at all cost, recover His favour. For their national well-being was so entirely bound up with His care, that to accept such a withdrawal unmoved could only be to court terrible disaster. Despite all, God is not far from them, nor is the way of restoration hard to reach. They have long had full proof of His love and of His forgiveness. It only needs penitent confession and sincere renunciation of evil on their part, and once again they shall know the Presence which means for them prosperity.

It is sometimes the kindest thing God can do for His children to remove those gifts which they have become accustomed to regard almost as their right. For in no other way can He educate them in the vital lessons of faith and obedience. Were He never to express disapproval in some such way as cannot be mistaken, we should certainly be utterly lost in our own conceits. And yet, as with Israel, how gladly does He come at our cry, and how readily does He disclose His face when we really seek Him! For He loves and yearns over us with tender solicitude. What we need most of all is to cultivate sensitiveness of soul, both in recognizing His corrections and in seeking His grace.

Your goodness is as a morning cloud, and as the early dew it goeth away.

ISRAEL was not without desires after God. The people realized the rightness of His demands and the excellence of His ideals. They suffered from no lack of light or understanding, but rather from strength of purpose. Their mood varied from day to day, alternating between yielding to the attraction of goodness and the false glitter of the world. At one time they would lift fervent hearts to Heaven; but soon their note changed, and they turned again to the profitable evils that were all about them. They were not consciously insincere but morally shallow. They altogether failed to take their obligation toward God seriously; and it is not too much to say that such a state is the despair alike of God and of His prophets.

Do we not know something of this same condition? Is it not the regret of many a Christian that his desires ebb and flow? That at one time he wants nothing beyond the love and service of God, but that the next day he finds himself cold almost to carelessness? And is not this the cause of so much of the powerlessness which characterizes Christian life to-day? For the double-minded man is unstable in all his ways, and is consequently unable to receive anything of the Lord. And yet the remedy is in our own hands. For it is the law of life that we cultivate or starve our desires at will. By steady application to the Divine standards their grip upon us increases until the desire wholly to follow Christ transcends every other, and we become "steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord." The alternative is full of peril, and is the more to be feared because its process is so entirely unconscious. Let us be very sincere with ourselves lest we unwittingly drift past "redemption point."

Though I have redeemed them, yet they have spoken lies against Me.

INGRATITUDE is of all things hardest to bear; and throughout Hosea's prophecy there runs the plaintive note of Divine plan because of it. God has had to suffer not only Israel's careless contempt of His love, but positive treachery on her part also. It were bad enough that all He has done should meet with no better return than the very fitful fealty which the nation at best observed toward Him. That His redeemed ones should bear false witness against Him, actually denying His Name before the heathen nations among whom they lived, was beyond all words. Truly there is no sorrow like unto His sorrow. Nor is there any human power so serious as that of exercising positive enmity against the love of God. The point of the Divine plaint against Israel is in the vividness of the contrast between His treatment of her and her treatment of Him. "Though . . . yet"!

Are we better than Israel in our treatment of Him? Have we so realized the obligations of the redeemed life as to make His glory our supreme business? Or are we actually speaking lies against Him, by giving the impression to those who behold us that His salvation is, after all, a more or less negligible thing, and that His claim upon us is nothing so strong as the claim of the world? It is in this way that Christ is daily wounded in the house of His friends, And we do well to search our hearts as to how dwelleth the love of God in us. For true love of Him is not in word, nor in tongue; but in deed, and in truth.

Israel hath forgotten his Maker, and buildeth temples.

IT was the last mark of Israel's religious shallowness that her erection of temples for worship should be actually an expression of her forgetfulness of God. The people had come by easy tolerance of idolatry to lose sight of His sovereignty. They forgot that the Lord their God was one Lord; and had actually fallen to the depth of sharing their worship of Him with the tribal deities of the surrounding nations. Doubtless in so doing they regarded themselves as commendably tolerant and as taking action likely to secure the patronage of other peoples for their own chief worship. That they were not lacking in zeal is certainly obvious. But religious energy may be entirely misdirected. It may come under the ban rather than under the blessing of Heaven. The altar either sanctifies the gift or degrades it.

God will accept no substitute for the heart devotion of His people. He demands from us the undivided service and love of lives redeemed. Nor is His Will concerning anyone ever obscure or hard to read. The tragedy is that so often we turn to more attractive projects and build other temples than His, vainly imagining that somehow our earnestness shall be accounted for righteousness. Some of us, indeed, do not even aspire to build temples, but are content to build shops, and offices, and mere dwelling-houses, as abiding expressions of our governing ideals. And yet how startled we are when all this is charged to us as forgetfulness of the Lord our God! And how great will be the awakening of that Day when all things are seen as they really are!

Their abominations were according as they loved.

THERE is more than Divine judgment expressed here. It is the lament of God over a people who have succeeded in ignoring His love, and who have repudiated His claims upon them. With unerring eye He discerns behind their outward perversion a hidden inward alienation which had persisted for a long time before they actually deserted Him. They gave their love to evil things before they gave their lives. They began to mind the abominations of idolatry long before they were mastered by them. They played with fire in secret until it leaped upon them. Now each has gone his own way, with his back turned upon God and hence upon his own truest good.

How careful we should be in guarding the hidden springs of life from contamination. How diligently we should keep our hearts; for out of them proceed eternal issues. What we love is, in the last analysis, our lord; and hence life or death is altogether self-determined. For love is fed by thought; and herein is the central responsibility of life—to watch our thoughts. As a man thinketh in his heart so is he. The wide area over which thoughts may legitimately range is in keeping with the breadth and liberty of the Gospel. The personal responsibility for their selection, which each of us maintains, is perhaps the most serious of all the demands of the Gospel. For their power in the creation of passion is the strongest force with which every man has to reckon within himself. Love of God will lift us to Heaven; while lust will drag us down to hell.

It is time to seek the Lord.

THIS is the core of Hosea's prophecy. In one pregnant declaration he challenges Israel to a vital decision. The issue has long been cleared of all obscurity. Now it must be taken. Everything that the nation has experienced, as well as all that he has spoken has been directed toward the creation in them of a sense of need, and of an impulse toward national penitence. They had suffered much; but God's heart and His hand were directing the suffering. They had been brought to an utter end of themselves; but only with this purpose in view. They had lost their hold on God; but their very consciousness of sin was testimony to the fact of His unbroken hold upon them. And the prophet endeavoured to interpret their stirrings of conscience and desire as being an instinctive response to His active love for them. The crisis-hour in their fortunes was upon them. To help them to take the tide at its flood was his earnest aim.

When the call of the Gospel acquires new meaning to us by reason of our newly-awakened consciousness of need, there are always voices which seek to deter our response. The voice of shame, which bids us remember well how we have forfeited all claim upon Him, is never silent. The voice of pride, which minimizes the depth of our fall, is always insistent. And the voice of procrastination, which derides the necessity of immediate action, is the most clamant of all. Yet conscience speaks loudest and last, re-echoing this Divine word, and encouraging us to turn again. We are wise only when we obey.

I drew them with cords of a man, with bands of love.

THERE is a distinct note of plaintiveness in God's charge against His faithless people. He has left nothing undone to secure their welfare, nor has anything of blessing been withheld from them. The declarations of His Word have been united with the beneficence of His providence in the ordering of their lives. Yet they have proved ungrateful and have requited His love with faithlessness and indifference. It is a grieved God Who recalls to them the kindly way by which He has led them and the unkindly treatment He has received at their hands. Often, it is true, His love has had to take unkindly forms in pursuance of its object in them. The sharp stroke of discipline has been as necessary as the soft word of encouragement. Every experience, however, of which He has been the Author has had its inspiration in unsleeping love. The very fact that they have been unable finally to leave Him, is testimony to the strength of the bonds which His affection has forged.

Were our fellowship with God dependent upon the grip of our own faith life would be one long uncertainty. Were it left to us to make advances to Him, we should for ever dwell afar off. But the truth is that our every desire is responsive to His own, and our every continuance proclaims His unbroken hold upon us. Again and again we strain the cords of love to the utmost. But though infinitely elastic they are infinitely strong. We may lengthen the chain that binds us to Him, but we can never break it. This is the glory of the Gospel.

Keep mercy and judgment, and wait on thy God continually.

THE prophet is filled with desire for the return of the people to their former allegiance and the renewal of their earlier experience of God's favour. He sees them self-destroyed by reason of their defection from Him; but while he does not hide from them the ultimate consequence of their faithlessness, he seeks to woo them back by stirring up their remembrance of His former mercies. If they will but relate themselves afresh to the law which they have deserted, and will seek the face of the Lord Who still loves them, their welcome is fully assured. It would seem, however, as though the very simplicity of the promise is a stumbling-block. For Hosea beseeches Ephraim in vain.

Here is the open secret of all fruitful life and effective service—obedience and dependence. And surely these conditions are within the power of us all. For the man who seeks to keep the commandment of God, as far as he apprehends it, finds himself kept by His power. There is that in the Divine law which sustains the loyalty of him who sets out to walk in it. It is dynamic as well as ethic to the one who realizes his own feebleness and waits upon God for the power to do His Will. For, be it remembered, it is not the imposition of a new standard but the interposition of a new strength which characterizes Christian discipleship. Nor does God ever fail to assert Himself in the lives of those who make "mercy and judgment" their chief aim.

I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death.

GOD'S last word is not of wrath but of loving purpose. Despite everything that the nation's sin has brought upon the land, and all that must yet be suffered, the dominant purpose in the heart of God is the deliverance and not the destruction of His people. Vivid as are the pictures in which their discipline and punishment are portrayed, they are unlikely to awe them into any changed manner of life. For it is one of the still unexplained things that fear is finally powerless to produce real reformation. Knowledge of the evil consequence of wrongdoing seldom deters any man from following the dictates of his own heart. Hence God's last word to Israel is full of love and of love's intention. The grave shall open its mouth in vain upon the people of His care. They shall be visited in judgment but not destroyed. The strain on His patience, and on their endurance, may be unspeakably severe; but in the end of the day His Will shall be triumphant and Israel shall be delivered, not only from sin's consequences but from sin also.

We are often inclined to be faithless concerning the beneficence of God's mind toward us. It seems at times as though all His storms and billows go over us. Nor are we able to dispute the righteousness of the treatment we resent. For we well know that it accords with our sin. And yet He is but training and fitting us for our inheritance and for eternal service. We journey not toward the grave but toward the Throne. The power of the last enemy has been broken by our Leader; and we need never entertain any doubt as to the end of the way if we are in His fellowship.

Ephraim shall say, What have I to do any more with idols?

IT is characteristic of the true prophet that he shares the optimism of the God Whose Word he declares. Hosea looks forward to the spiritual reformation which the God-directed experiences of judgment and of grace shall produce in Ephraim. No more unlovely character is drawn than that which he draws of the tribe, which, more than any other in Israel, seemed to welcome the intrusion of the idols of surrounding nations and to fall to the level of licentiousness which their worship involved. The Divine commandment had failed to awaken conscience; the Divine judgment had not inspired any fear. But the Divine love, realized at length, shall do what no other weapon in God's armoury could effect. It shall break Ephraim down in contrition and penitence. The idols shall be renounced when the greatness of His grace is realized.

The love of God is, above all things, jealous. He demands the first place in the hearts of His people, and will not share His throne with any. Yet too often we dishonour Him by offering divided allegiance, and by setting up some idol which detracts from His glory and robs Him of the strength that should be entirely engaged in His service. These idols take many forms, not seldom being in themselves lawful things which have assumed an unlawful place in our affections. Work, home, ambition, pleasure, are all examples of such. But when we realize the greatness and condescension of Christ's love we cast them all at His feet. And He becomes for ever our Lord.

JOEL i. 19.

O Lord, to Thee do I cry.

JOEL is one with the other prophets of his day in what he sees to be the inevitable outcome of the tendencies which are everywhere discerned in the conduct of his people. Being a man whose education for the prophetic office has been the work of God Himself, who has learned in secret fellowship the eternal principles upon which His righteous dealings with men are determined, he does not shrink from uttering truths which must be unpalatable to his hearers. For it is clear to him that persistence in their God-forgetting ways can have but one end. Israel has known something of His displeasure ; but as yet His wrath has not been outpoured. Yet this too must come upon them unless they repent. If they will not seek the Throne of Grace He will set up in their midst the Throne of Judgment.

Exhorting the people to pray, Joel must himself exemplify his injunctions. So, while declaiming against iniquity, he declares his own faith in God and his intention of holding fast to His promises. Such a man is certain to take others with him into the Sanctuary. He who determines to pray alone, in circumstances like these, will find that he prays in concert. For there are always those who only require a courageous lead to influence them God-ward. Should not we to-day set ourselves each to give that lead ? For who can doubt that the moral tendency of common life to-day is toward the complete exclusion of God ? And only prayer can change things.

I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten.

UNDER the figure of a land devastated by successive plagues of locust, cankerworm, caterpillar, and palmerworm, the actual state of Israel's life is set forth to her. The destruction of the summer crops by these insect pests is symbolic of the deterioration of the moral fibre of the nation. Her enduements have been squandered; her opportunities have been misused; her privileges have been outraged; and her responsibilities have been ignored. In consequence, the nation is morally weak and spiritually impoverished beyond all hope of recovery. For just as such plagues make future cultivation of the devastated land well-nigh impossible, so religious declension saps the human heart of vitality and makes self-reformation impossible. But God can do the impossible and can restore an individual or a nation. This indeed is His covenant.

Many a life is burdened to-day with a sense not only of helplessness but of hopelessness. Sin against light, and wilful revolt against the love of God, has been brought home to us; and the prevailing consciousness of having squandered our sacred birthright holds us in bondage. In this state prayer loses its power and the Divine Word its sweetness; and we despair of ever regaining the lost ground. Can God ever trust us again? Is it possible that He should commit to us the treasure of His Gospel and accept our discredited professions? The answer to these our fears is in the experience of every child of His—"He restoreth my soul." For not one of us has wholly escaped the years of the locust.

Let the weak say, I am strong.

NOT only is God going to judge His people but to visit also those nations under whom His people have suffered. While He has made their armies the scourge of Israel, He has by no means overlooked their cruelty and oppression. In these things the nations have gone beyond His commandment, and have violated the common laws of humanity written in every man's conscience. For this they will be judged; and the method of their judgment shall be that of warfare between themselves. In the general strife, from which Israel will be protected, each nation will receive its fitting reward. It is for encouragement and incitement that the prophet calls upon even the weak to array themselves for this conflict and to count themselves strong.

Of far different application is this same word to the people of God, who, in every age, are involved in the warfare of the Cross and the Kingdom. It is through them that He designs the final triumph of His cause to be accomplished. And no one of them is exempt. Weakness and insufficiency is no plea for non-engagement with His foes. For with the weakest obedience He co-operates in His own mighty power. The fight is not theirs but His own. And yet he condescends to need their hands and feet, their brain and energy. His plans can only be carried out by their means. His power can only be expressed through their opposition of evil. What honour is ours, and with what confidence ought we to face the foe to-day, since His strength finds its perfecting medium in weakness.

The words of Amos . . . which he saw.

AMOS had not been trained as a prophet in any school save that of God Himself. Dwelling remote from the haunts of men, he had communed with Him and with his own heart in the solitudes of Nature. There he had unhurried opportunity of pondering over, and of thinking through, the problems that stirred him. Under a strong constraint of the Spirit he knew that he must ultimately declare God's call to the nation, and that in some mysterious way all his previous life had prepared him for this mission. So he gave himself to the complete understanding of what God would have him say by concentrating all his attention upon the things which He made to pass before him.

It is the secret of all effective ministry that men speak only that which they first see. For what the world stands in need of is not theories nor speculations in regard to eternal truth, but certainties. It is vision which vitalizes the message of God, and qualifies the messenger to speak with confidence and without apology. And such vision is God's response to purity of heart and intention. He reveals His secret and entrusts His cause to single-minded men who, when they speak, carry conviction to the hearers. May it not be that we have failed in our witness to Christ because of an earlier failure in this respect? And do we not need to emulate Amos, who spoke because he saw; and one later than his day also, who, "looking upon Jesus as He walked said, Behold the Lamb of God"?

AMOS ii. 11.

Is it not even thus, O ye children of Israel? saith the Lord.

A LARGE part of God's goodness toward Israel has been His treatment of their foes. Again and again He has discomfited and scattered them, with the twofold purpose of affording deliverance to His people and of furnishing them with an object-lesson. For if He so dealt with aliens as punishment for sin was He not also able and likely to deal with those who had fuller knowledge of His Will, and whose clearer light involved larger responsibility? Yet, as a whole, the nation had been unmindful of His mercy and indifferent to His warning. Relief from oppression and military difficulty had been constantly succeeded by moral slackness. Absorption in material concerns had speedily blinded them to the lessons He sought to teach. Now, through Amos, He reasons with them, stating the case with convincing clearness and pressing home upon their conscience the sin of unthankfulness and contumacy.

Has God no such controversy with His people to-day? We cannot deny His benefits—indeed we do not even seek to do so; but we do forget them, and act frequently as though He had not revealed His Will in His kindness toward us by Jesus Christ. And it is part of His grace that we are not allowed to go on in indifference to His claims. Every prompting of conscience, whether by the word of a messenger or the providential arrangement of life's circumstances, is just His way of bringing us to recognize the true state of things as between ourselves and Him. It is solicitude for our truest good as well as for His glory which smites us with the arrow of conviction—"Is it not even thus, O ye children?"

Can two walk together, except they be agreed?

AGAIN God seeks to convict His people of their sin against Him, and of the inevitableness of His judgment. They have forfeited the blessing of fellowship with Him and have put an ever-increasing distance between themselves and His love. But they have not succeeded in thwarting its purpose; and the judgments which are about to fall upon them are designed to bring them back to that state of heart, and to that attitude of simple surrender to His control, which shall make resumption of interrupted communion possible. Gentler methods have failed to create and maintain in them heart-agreement with His ways. Hence His recourse to sternness. If this is but borne in mind as the interpretation of the experiences Amos foretells it will rob their distress of its sting. It will save them from any resentment which would further postpone their fullest blessedness.

That this is a law fundamental to fellowship with God is obvious by simple analogy of all human comradeship. If two are to walk together they must be of one mind in regard to the direction they take and the pace at which they journey. Otherwise the walk must necessarily come to a premature end. And to walk with God, which is at once the simplest and the highest expression of the Christian life, means just this—that all controversy between us is settled, that we choose to go His way under His guidance. Journeying thus we realize life in its ideal fulness, with the House of many Mansions as its alluring and inspiring goal.

Amos iv. 6, 8, 9, 10, 11.

Yet have ye not returned unto Me, saith the Lord.

LIKE a refrain this plaint runs through the message of Amos. For God is speaking by him, and is revealing not only His displeasure but His grief also at the hardness and indifference of Israel. He recounts the experiences of which He has been the Author, and by which He has sought to bring the nation to its knees. Famine has succeeded drought, and defeat has followed upon pestilence, so that the life of the people has been brought to its lowest ebb. Yet they have not read their lesson aright. They have adopted one expedient after another, and have turned every way except to the one direction from whence alone their true help proceeds. They are not afraid to look their enemies in the face ; yet they fear to face God. It would almost seem as though they had lost all moral and spiritual sensibility by reason of their defiant determination to suffer anything rather than give up their sin.

When God knocks at the heart's door of either a man or a nation the blow hurts and bruises. This is the interpretation of many an unkindly providence in our lives, which, rightly understood, is but His most forceful expression of desire and purpose. He seeks to draw us unto Himself ; and even so. He must often turn away thwarted, for the time being, by our wilfulness. We may think that we have defeated His love in moral conflict, that we have succeeded in securing freedom from further interference with our mental self-content. Actually we have only defeated our own highest interests and exiled ourselves from the blessings of a love beyond measure.

Seek good, and not evil, that ye may live.

IT might almost be thought unnecessary that such obvious counsel should be given to God's people. For this is an elementary lesson indeed, and one that ought to require no emphasis. Yet such is the destructive power of sin that even the most ordinary moral instincts become confused so that men actually cease to realize the true nature of the two great alternatives. Indeed, they come to regard evil as being good because it is profitable, and good as being evil because it is restrictive. The canons of judgment by which action is self-determined become altogether untrustworthy when any man engages himself in pursuit of an objective which conscience condemns. It is because this has become so in Israel's case that the prophet must needs take them back to the very first lessons of faith.

The things upon which we dwell ultimately determine the quality of life. Hence it is that we are exhorted to seek those things that are above if we would walk worthily of our Christian profession. Just as the mind set upon earthly things ultimately deteriorates until earthly things become dominant in desire and determination, so, too, the mind that is set upon the things that are true, and lovely, and of good report, is lifted into their realm. They become its sovereign instincts, and ultimately its sanctifying passion. Nothing then is of greater importance than that we should be aware of what it is we are really seeking. For it is the inexorable rule of life that "every one that seeketh findeth," either to his own hurt or help.

Woe to them that are at ease in Zion.

MATERIAL prosperity had bred, in a section at least of the people, a love of softness and luxury in which religious obligation was at first lightly deferred and ultimately deliberately neglected. While the cause of the nation, with which the cause of God was inextricably bound up, demanded courage, energy, and endurance, these were content to minister to their own selfish pleasures and to live wantonly. And while in this way unfaithful to their supreme obligation, Nemesis overtook them. They shrank in real stature to the size of the thing to which they gave themselves. Having made their gods they become like unto them. And in the day of test, so soon to break upon Israel, they would be among the first to succumb. For it is thus that sin ever finds out its foolish victims.

The privileges and blessings of the Gospel are so free and so ample that we are all in danger of taking their corresponding obligation lightly. In so doing we misconceive the first purpose of our redemption, which is not merely that we should be enriched for our own good, but that, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, we should serve God without fear in holiness and righteousness. For we have been called by Christ, both by His word and example, not to a life of ease but of strenuous encounter. We are entrusted with share in the timeless battle of the Lord against arrogant forces of evil in the world. And we cannot be "at ease in Zion" without degrading our commission and denying the Lord Who bought us.

Then said the Lord, Behold, I will set a plumbline in the midst of My people Israel.

THE vision of the plumbline which Amos saw could have but one meaning. Just as a builder tests the perpendicular of his building by use of line and lead, so God in His righteousness would judge His people; and from His judgment there could be no appeal. For as the plumbline cannot lie, so His righteousness cannot vary. Its judgment being according to truth, Israel must be dealt with in strict accord with the merits of the case. Alas, the prophet knew that, compared with the standard of Divine requirement, Israel had already fallen so far from the straight that her rejection was a foregone conclusion. Nor would even the most querulous spirit in the land be able to contest the justice of God's way.

The Divine plummet, by which the actions of His people in every age are tested, is the teaching of the Lord Christ. There is no casuistry here, for He sets forth no code of rules and precepts, but declares great principles of truth, leaving their honest application to each individual disciple. It is by His words that we are judged to-day as well as in the Great Day when the secret judgment of the present shall be set forth in eternal record. How careful and diligent, therefore, should we be to apply to ourselves sincerely and constantly this simple test—does my life-purpose accord with Christ's perpendicular, or is it inclining toward ways that are ways of death? For it is certain that if we daily took ourselves in hand and judged our actions in this way we should not be condemned with the world. For the most part destiny is simply self-determination.

A famine . . . of hearing the words of the Lord.

THE thing that Israel regarded so negligently and looked upon as of such little account will yet become intensely desirable to them when it is, however, out of reach. They have treated the Word of the Lord with indifference. Its blessings have been despised and its prohibitions resented. Although familiar with its claims, the nation has completely dethroned its authority in favour of the immediate prosperities which devotion to material things produces. God has had long patience with them. He has given them abundant opportunity of repentance and reform—but all in vain. Now at length the prophet declares that His patience is exhausted and that the punishment of their stubborn rejection will take shape according to the form of their sin. They have despised God's Word and they shall be brought to want it. For they shall come to know that with its obedience is bound up their entire good and that in its light is their life.

The constancy of God's grace is apt to blind the thoughtless man to its reality. Having the Word of God always at hand he thinks of its promises as being always available, so that he may turn to them when he is so disposed, while at other times he disregards them. Whereas, in truth, our attitude toward the Divine law recoils upon ourselves, and records itself unerringly upon character and hence upon destiny. The greatest tragedy of all is when one awakens to the value of that which he has squandered, and to the impossibility of recovering what he has lost.

In that day will I raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen.

THE final message of Amos is one of hopeful confidence in God. Judgment is to issue not in final overthrow but in restoration. Its purpose has not been retributive so much as disciplinary, and it in no wise contradicted the promises which God made to the fathers. Wind and storm, while beating upon Israel, have been all the time fulfilling His Word. The fire in which they have been tried has been consuming the dross, that they may be qualified to offer to the Lord an offering in righteousness. He has been at work among them on a grand scale which is the measure of the greatness of His desires for them. All this is declared in the promise that the assurances given to David should yet be carried out to the uttermost.

In all God's ways with men the end interprets the means. We are never in the dark as to His aims, which have been fully and finally declared in Christ. And it is our highest wisdom to co-operate with His power in their pursuit. For we are involved in all that the triumph of the Kingdom of God means. We may hinder its progress and thwart its onward march by unfaithfulness. We may necessitate the Divine Workman putting us aside for a while, as instruments unusable and unfit for His service. But His purposes are triumphant and will be accomplished in spite of us if we refuse to yield to the plain demands of His correction. Should we not act differently if we always realized that by disobedience we are flinging away our highest glory?

In the day that thou stoodest on the other side.

EDOM is to be punished in consequence of its attitude toward Israel. Not only has it been guilty of cruelty and oppression on occasions, but also of indifference when Israel stood in need of help against their foes. Having the opportunity of assistance it refused it and stood apart as a mere spectator of the conflict. For this failure to use its resources aright, in a cause which was always in some way related to the cause of God, He will visit Edom in judgment. It is the burden of Obadiah's message that God takes note of peoples as of persons, maintaining a standard of judgment by which the actions of each are weighed.

Edom's pose of unconcern is too often reproduced in our own day by those who see the forces of good and evil in conflict but yet withhold themselves from taking part in it. Self looms so large to them that anything demanding the sacrifice of self-interest makes no appeal to their hearts. They have already determined that life for them shall be as undisturbed as may be. Nothing must interfere with their own comfort and convenience—not even the crusade of Christ's cause. They are content to be mere onlookers at the struggle which wages incessantly in life's arena, mildly interested it may be, but without any passion beyond self-preservation. Of all states into which any man may come this is the most deadly. It grows insidiously upon him until he is literally unable to stir himself up to take hold upon God and duty. Like Edom in its day, and the priest and Levite in theirs, he stands " on the other side " now, only to discover in the Great Day that he has been standing " on the other side " from God Himself.

Jonah rose up to flee . . . from the presence of the Lord.

IT may have been that the magnitude of his mission appalled Jonah, and that he feared the personal consequences of faithfulness to the Divine command. The people of Nineveh would surely rise up in resentment against an unknown prophet and put him to death for breaking in upon their liberties by such a proclamation of destruction. Or, it may have been that, knowing something of the tender mercy of God, he foresaw with clearness that if the proclamation produced a repentant spirit the people of Nineveh would surely be spared, and that his own reputation as a prophet would suffer in consequence. In either case, self-persuasion would not be difficult. And Jonah, finding that circumstances offered a ready way of escape, no doubt thought that he was doing no great wrong. He did not realize that, fleeing from the task committed to him, he was forfeiting God's presence and journeying into darkness and death.

It is always a mistake to look on the difficulties of God-given duty without estimating carefully the accompanying grace. This was Jonah's mistake; and it is too often our own. For when God gives command there is an implied if not an expressed assurance of enduement, which is sufficient to make the weakest an able minister. Nor can we desert any duty, however hard, without flouting the promise of God, and without putting distance between ourselves and His presence. To trifle with the obligations of discipleship on any pretext whatever is to deny the faith.

JONAH ii. 4.

I am cast out of Thy sight; yet I will look again toward Thy holy temple.

GOD takes infinite pains to convince His servants of the sinfulness of sin because of the greatness of the issues which their service affects. This explainf all the providential circumstances which are directed upon Jonah's disobedience and their recognition by him as being controlled by the God from Whose command he had run away. Hence his prayer of confession and hope. He realizes himself as cast out of God's sight, having forfeited every claim upon His grace. He does not seek to extenuate his fault nor to excuse himself. It is even of the Lord's mercies that he is not consumed. But, confident in His character, he ventures to turn again toward the light in which he once lived. He has no rightful claim upon God, yet he dares to hope that His patience is not altogether exhausted, nor His love unwilling to receive him again.

The consciousness of sin is always evidence of our lost hold upon God. It is, at the same time, evidence of His unbroken hold on us. When we realize that we have, somehow, failed of His grace, and are no longer worthy of the honour of His service, we may be sure that this conviction comes only of His Spirit. Thus we are emboldened to lift up our eyes again to Heaven. Shame covers our faces though hope fills our hearts. And we may set ourselves to a new start with the certainty that humbled weakness makes strongest claim upon His power, when our renewed look of penitence and faith is the beginning of renewed obedience. For most of us the Christian life is simply a succession of similar new beginnings.

The word of the Lord came unto Jonah the second time.

HOW wonderful is the grace which accepts discredited professions and seals forgiveness by the gift of new opportunity! Nothing could convince the prophet of the grace of God more surely than such treatment at His hand. Nor could it fail to impart to his preaching a new note of passionate earnestness. He could now declare Heaven's message to Nineveh with a ring of triumphant certainty and with a new hope actuating his fervour. What God had done for him He would not fail to do on a greater scale for a contrite city. And Jonah could now expect the miracle of revival in a dead community with gladness for God's honour, and without thought of his own repute.

There are few of us who would be in the Lord's service at all to-day were it not for the grace which gives us a second chance. In some degree, Jonah's experience is our own. For who has not been guilty, as he was, of defection and even of desertion? And, as with him, the way in which we respond to the word of the Lord which comes a second time has an all-important bearing upon our lives. For if the grace of forgiveness has not made us very tender and sensitive in regard to the Divine love, we are lost indeed. If we take it as a mere matter of course, having learned nothing from our deliverance, God can do nothing with us. If, however, we read this lesson aright, all Heaven is open, even to such as we have been. And in this respect Jonah and Peter and John Mark and a host of others, who embraced their second chance when it came, encourage us to lift up our hearts.

JONAH iv. 4, 9.

Doest thou well to be angry?

THE colloquy between God and Jonah is full of grave meaning and warning. Following upon the success of his mission to Nineveh came reaction. The old thought of self-importance asserted itself until the prophet's mind was possessed and his vision distorted by imaginary grievance. His reputation seemed of more import to him than the deliverance of the threatened city, so he turned upon God in defence of what he looked upon as his own due. Twice over did God remonstrate with him in the penetrating inquiry—"Doest thou well to be angry?" The first time Jonah is silent, admitting the righteousness of the Divine query. When, however, the lesson of God's sovereignty is again pressed home upon him, he presumes to answer the same remonstrance in angry self-defence. From that moment he cut himself off from further fellowship and service.

Nothing is more solemn than the possibility that one who has been used by God should ultimately become a castaway. Not that God arbitrarily severs the tie between Himself and His people, cutting them off from the communication of Divine life; but that they become unusable so that He has to put them aside. Whenever we refuse His grace in the discipline of our own lives, seeking only the prominence that accrues from His public service, we are in this danger. And we need no other sign of warning than that of Jonah the prophet, though on every hand and in every age are startling examples of similar tragedy which corroborate this warning word.

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